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SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S
MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* presents the picture of India from the day of Indian Independence to the period of Emergency of 1975. Its protagonist is the child born at the stroke of midnight of 15th August 1947. And the novel ends with the birth of Saleem's illegitimate son of Emergency. Both Saleem and his son are the children born from illegitimate relations and born on two important dates in the history of India as a nation. The novel very effectively presents the social, political, and religious life of Indians through magic realism, where it seems that Rushdie is historicizing the fiction and fictionalizing the history. It presents the image of India through magic realism where fantasy and realism get mingled in the most subtle manner.

Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* creates situations which can be considered allegories of political events in India. The narrator of *Midnight's Children* Saleem Sinai, in presenting his own life is also presenting the history of his nation, India. Saleem is born at the stroke of midnight of India's Independence in 1947. He carries the burden of history on his shoulder. At the very beginning of the novel Saleem says that 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country' (p.3).

The use of politics in his writings enables Rushdie to scrutinize the functioning of contemporary governance and thereby criticize the misrule by which the democratic norms have been violated. He uses political events in the novel as co-texts. In India, early years of Independence are marked by communal violence, regionalism, communalism, corruption, in public offices, election malpractices, defective Five Year Plans, the self-interest of politicians, unscrupulousness in business practices, illiteracy, disease, and starvation deaths. And Indira Gandhi encouraged corruption among her colleagues to remain in power.

As the birth of Saleem Sinai and his counterpart Shiva approaches the midnight hour of August 15, Rushdie brings part one of *Midnight's Children* to a close with the revelation that partition was not as inextricably tied to the wheels of destiny as one might think. Nor was there any method to the madness of partition, for the pampered life that Saleem would enjoy as a child was made possible only by the arbitrary, impulsive decision of midwife Mary Pereira to swap Shiva and Saleem's nametags at birth. The former, born most unnaturally (for babies never have kneecaps) with a set of knees capable of suffocating full grown men, and the latter, with a nose worthy of a name of its own, would soon become bitter rivals as their paths diverged. "So: there were

knees and a nose, a nose and knees. In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents – the children of midnight were also the children of *the time: fathered, you understand, by history... in a country which is itself a sort of dream*" (132). And so the Midnight Children Conference, a cerebral connection among the supernatural children of partition, was born in the mind of Saleem.

Throughout the novel Rushdie presents the contradictory picture of India through his narration, characters and episodes. When India got Independence in 1947 Saleem Sinai narrates the picture as follows:

And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with green flames of blistering paint and glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world (p.155).

Rushdie presents the happy and dark side of independence through the light and fire imagery. For Indians freedom was dream but when it came it also became a nightmare due to the riots and partition of India and Pakistan. Saleem Sinai presents past, present and future together when he says, 'I became the chosen child of midnight ,whose parents were not his parents, whose son not be his own...' (p.157). This is very true because when he is born ,the other child of Vanita and Wee Willie Winkie ,Shiva, is also born with Saleem and Mary Pereira changes the tags of the babies and both the babies are exchanged and therefore he is not the son of his parents. Similarly, during Emergency of 1975, imposed by Indira Gandhi, Saleem Sinai was forcefully sterilized and so he could not become father but he is made to marry Parvati , who was having a child of Shiva in her womb. So his child is not really his child. Rushdie presents the socio-political scenario of the country when his protagonist Saleem describes the children of Midnight:

In fact all over the new India, the dream we shared , children were being born who were only partial the offspring of their parents- the Children of Midnight were also the children of the time : fathered, you understand by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of a dream (p.159).

The subtle irony of Salman Rushdie can be seen from several passages of the novel. When Saleem Sinai is born, the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote a letter to him and what he said in his letter was ironically very true. He said:

'Dear Baby Saleem, my belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth. You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is so eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be , in a sense, the mirror of our own' (p.167).

There are many turns, twists and ups and downs in the life of Saleem and also in the social, political and historical life of India as a country. In that sense what Nehru said was right. That is, Saleem's life was the mirror of India. Saleem Sinai presents the picture of India when he convened the conference of Midnight's Children. He describes the conference as follows:

Gujaratis, and fair-skinned northerners reviling Dravidian 'blackies'; there were religious rivalries ;and class entered our councils. The rich children turned up their noses at in the low company; Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables; while, among the low born, the pressures of poverty and communism were becoming evident... and ,on the top of all this there were clashes of personality , and the hundred squalling rows which are unavoidable in a parliament composed entirely half-grown brats. In this way the Midnight's Children's conference fulfilled the prophecy of the Prime Minister and became , in truth, a mirror of nation' (p.353-54).

Midnight's Children represents an attempt by both Rushdie and Saleem to write a new history of India, one that takes all facets of the great nation into account. The hyphenated terms Saleem generates to describe his relationship with India suggest that there are multiple, varied, and equally legitimate ways in which to experience—and, therefore, write—history. These new, hyphenated definitions reflect Saleem's intention to redefine national history according to his own personal narrative. In order to succeed, Saleem must bend and reshape language. Words get jammed together, just as the details of Saleem's life are jammed into the political

history of India. By redefining language, Saleem redefines reality. The old, formal conventions of narrative cannot sufficiently convey this new story; so Saleem breaks those conventions, playfully violating the rules of time, space, and language.

Since Saleem's personal identity is inextricably entwined with that of India, Saleem's disappointments may be seen as a reflection of the newly forming country's own problems. Saleem wistfully describes the timeless Kolyos Kid, trapped forever in his billboard but free from the ravages of time and age. Saleem longs for his lost childhood in the same way that India is currently overcome by a sense of nostalgia, looking back longingly at its ancient past as it lurches inexorably into the future. With every uncomfortable step forward, something else must be discarded, a sentiment dramatically captured by Saleem's lost finger. Saleem's awkward, inadvertent sexual experience with his aunt represents a loss of a different kind of innocence. As uncomfortable as the moment is, it marks a turning point for Saleem. Immediately afterwards, Mary shows up with new long trousers. As Saleem trades his short pants for long ones, he takes a distinct step into adulthood. The world as Saleem knows it is over, a point the Brass Monkey drives home when she steps on his globe, shattering it.

Like Saleem and the nation of India, the children of the conference and the families of the estate are also beginning to shed their innocence. The midnight's children begin to take after their parents, developing prejudices and biases. Divisions begin to break them up, and Saleem and Shiva's highly philosophical debate demonstrates the turmoil within the conference, which reflects the political turmoil facing India at the time. Saleem's speeches align him with the Communist Party, while Shiva seems to espouse the benefits of a system based on individual-focused, free-market capitalism.

India's difficulties in moving forward are also symbolized in Commander Sabarmati's trial. The debate surrounding the commander's innocence pits traditional and progressive values against one another. That a judge finds Sabarmati guilty represents a victory for liberal progress, yet the favored treatment he receives, along with the fact that Lila is forced to abdicate custody of their children, seems to temper that victory.

During the conference of Midnight's Children, convened by Saleem, Shiva, the alter-ego of Saleem speaks very scornfully about the rich people and presents a true picture of India. When Saleem suggested to uphold the third principle which goes beyond masses and classes, capital and labour and them and us, Shiva shouts at Saleem as follows:

'No, little rich boy, there is no third principle, there is only money and poverty, and have- and -lack, and right,-and- left, there is only me and against- the World! The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world, little Snotnose, is things. Things and their makers rule the world: look at Birla, and Tata, and all the powerful: they make things. For things, the country is run. Not for people. For things, America and Russia send aid.; but five hundred million stay hungry. When you have things, then there is no time to dream; when you don't, you fight' (p.354).

Shiva, the opponent of Saleem in conference dismantles every idea or principle proposed by Saleem and holds the mirror to society. And it seems, Shiva is refuting Nehru's idealistic view of people's democratic secular country based on the principle of equality. Moreover, the image of India that Shiva presents after the first decade of Independence is, more or less, similar even today.

Rushdie's understanding of Indian society is quite apt. Indians may quarrel and fight among themselves but in hard times they immediately become patriotic. And his protagonist Saleem gives an instance of it:

When Morarji Desai, the urine -drinking Finance Minister, launched his 'Ornaments for Armaments' appeal, my mother handed over gold bangles and emerald ear-ring; When Morarji floated an issue of defence bonds, Ahmed Sinai bought them in bushels. War, it seemed, had brought a new dawn to India; in the Times of India, a cartoon captioned 'War with China' showed Nehru looking at graphs labeled 'Emotional Integration' Industrial Peace, and People's faith in Government' and crying, 'We never had it, so good' (p.417).

Through the passages of the novel Rushdie explores the corruption and black side of Indian politics. Saleem narrates Indira Gandhi's regime as Prime Minister as follows:

Before I return to telling of my private life, I should like to be known that Picture Singh who revealed to me that the country's corrupt, 'black' economy had grown as large as the official, 'white' variety, which he did by showing me a newspaper photograph of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Her hair, parted in the centre, was snow-white on one side and black as night on other, so that, depending on which profile she presented, she resembled either a stoat or an ermine. Recurrence of the centre-parting in history; and economy as an analogue of a Prime Ministerial hairstyle...Picture Singh it was who told me that Mishra, the railway minister, was also officially-appointed minister for bribery, through whom the biggest deals in the black economy were cleared, and who arranged for pay-offs to appropriate ministers and officials; without Picture Singh, I might never have known the poll-fixing in state elections in Kashmir (p.558)

The corruption prevalent during Indira Gandhi's rule was an open secret and Ramchandra Guha states the same thing in his book *India After Gandhi*.

...a key aide of prime minister was assassinated in JP's home state Bihar...A politician sans ideology, Mishra had collected large sum of money from the Soviets and the Indian business class (485).

The novel brings to foreground the political climate of India leading to Emergency. The mist created by the political situation is described by Saleem as follows:

Dark clouds were gathering in political skies as well: in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roosts, Jay-Prakash-Narayan led coalition of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress; in Gujarat, there were riots, railway trains were burned and Morarji Desai went on a fast-un-to-death to bring down the corrupt government of the Congress...(p.575)

The freedom of country, which was in its very childhood, was sacked and the anarchy loosed upon the country. And with the declaration of Emergency, Indira Gandhi imposed another night for almost two years. Saleem comments on this situation as follows:

...the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-sub-versive-elements. Something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of India and beginning of continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my son, the child of renewed ticktock, come out into the world (p.585)

The novel portrays the image of India during the two nights- the midnight when India got freedom in 1947 and the beginning of midnight when the same freedom came to an end. Saleem very appropriately describes the Emergency as beginning of Old rule of Emperors and Kings in India:

When the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers, I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air... in that city which was littered with phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last. Pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism. It smelled like burning oily rags (p. 592).

The novel begins to come full circle when Saleem marries Parvati. As Saleem prepares to raise Shiva's child, he finds himself in a similar position to his father, who also raised another man's child. And just as Saleem's midnight birth corresponded to the birth of a new nation, so too does his son's birth correspond to the beginning of a new era in Indian history. However, there are crucial differences between this iteration and the original instance. Whereas Saleem was born at a moment suffused with optimism, his son Adam is born during the State of Emergency, a time of anxiety and discord. With the birth of Adam, the story of the original band of midnight's children draws to a close, only to begin a new story. Instead of Shiva's knees and Saleem's nose, Parvati gives birth to a baby with a pair of enormous ears. Shiva had the power of war, and Saleem the ability to smell. Adam, with his enormous ears, will have the power to listen to his father's story.

Shiva is unmade by women and saved by a war, just as Saleem had promised at the start of the novel. For all of his military might and rumored prowess as a lover, Shiva remains unable to accept or give love. He turns on the midnight's children, and on Saleem in particular. In his wanton desire to destroy Saleem, he voluntarily permits himself to be destroyed as well. Throughout the novel, Shiva's greatest insecurities stem from his class standing, and thus generate his resentment and hatred of Saleem. By the end of the novel, however, the reversed fortunes of the two have righted themselves. Shiva, the poor child who should have been rich, becomes wealthy and respected, and Saleem, the rich child who should have been poor, loses his inheritance and dwells in a slum. However, Shiva remains unable to shake the legacy of poverty that shaped him, emphasizing once again that our personal histories mold us in inexorable ways.

The image of a Widow is haunting the narration of the novel. Saleem finally reveals the mystery of the Widow's identity: she is Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister. With this revelation, Saleem's life and the nation's history become unified a final time. When Saleem was born, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, wrote him a letter and welcomed him into the world. Now Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, bears the responsibility for destroying Saleem. After declaring the State of Emergency in 1975, Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties, engaged in massive arrests, initiated a campaign of forced sterilization, and destroyed ghettos throughout the country. The political and human rights abuses of those years are among the novel's central tragedies. Rushdie exposes how Indira Gandhi specifically targets the midnight's children, sterilizing them and thereby draining them of their powers. Rushdie implies that Gandhi was responsible for destroying not only the hope and future of an entire generation, but that of a still fledgling democracy as well. The chant "India is Indira and Indira is India" represents a call for singularity. Just as Pakistan defines itself according to a single god, the slogan for Gandhi reduces the entire multitudinous nation to a single woman. In their multiplicity and the diversity of their powers, the midnight's children pose a threat to Gandhi and the single-ruler state. At the Widow's hostel, the prophesy of Saleem's birth is fulfilled, the nightmare of green and black is illuminated, and the Midnight's Children's Conference is brought to its resounding end.

To sum up, Rushdie is aware of the fact that he is not presenting the authoritative history of India through *Midnight's Children* but it is history through memory and memory can add and obliterate some facts. The strength of the novel lies in its fantasy-realism element. So what Saleem Sinai presents is not absolute reality but most of the things that he narrates are also found in the history books on India from Independence to Emergency. It would be appropriate to summarize the proposition on this topic with Salman Rushdie's own words from *Imaginary Homelands*:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to 'read' the world (p.25).

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