

Traits of Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Prof.A.G.Ananth,M.A.,M.Phil., B.Ed., NET, PGDCA,
Department Of English, Annai Vailankanni Arts And Science College, Thanjavur

“Magic realism”, a term first coined by Franz Roh and used in the title of his book *“Nach-expressionismus, magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europaischer Maleri (1925)”*. He was concerned with the characteristic and tendencies discernible in the work of certain German painter of his contemporary period, especially the artists of Munich, because their themes were often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic and with a certain dream-like quality. Later the term came to be associated with certain kinds of fiction. The term drew much attention on literary circles and chiefly used by the literary critics.

By the end of the 1980s, the term became a well-established ‘label’ for some forms of fiction and for few writers such as Luis Borges (1899-1988), the Argentinean writer who authored *Historia universal de la infamia*, widely acclaimed by many as the first work of magic realism; Gabriel Garcia Marquez is also a notable exponent of this kind of fiction, especially his novel *“One Hundred Years of Solitude”*; Alejo Carpentier is another described as a ‘magic realist’. Other writers such as Italo Calvino, John Fowles, Gunter Grass, Emma Tennant, Angela carter, and Salman Rushdie.

The common traits of Magic realism is, they chiefly have a strong and imagination inducing narrative style that will inculcate the reality with the unforeseen and incomprehensible that comprises the elements of stargaze, fantasy, fairy tales or mythology and blending it with the mundane reality, often in a

kaleidoscopic envision of the author. The unfeigned reason for blending magical elements into a realistic atmosphere in order to decipher the verity of the reality and to differentiate the difference between the real and fantasy.

Categorizing magic realism into a particular literary theory would be a herculean task. The concept of magic realism is a troubled one for literary theory. In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether. Magic realism is a contested term primarily because the majority of critics increase the confusion surrounding its history by basing their consideration of the term on one of its explanations rather than acknowledging the full complexity of its origins.

The incompatibility of magic realism with the more established genre systems becomes itself interesting, itself a focus for critical attention, when one considers the fact that it seems, in a literary context, to be most obviously operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions.

The concept of Magic Realism and other related supernatural elements may feel alienated to the citizens of the various countries, but not for the Indians. Since the period of primordial,

the denizens of India, been hearing the tales of supernatural, superstitious stories from pillar to post. So it will not alienate the Indians out of it.

Salman Rushdie, one of the epitomes in Indian Diasporic writings, expatriated from India and settled in England. He began his writing career quietly, but he quickly became one of the twentieth century's most well known writers, not only for the ire he attracted from Islamic fundamentalists after the publication of his work *The Satanic Verses* (1988) but also for his thought-provoking examinations of a changing sociopolitical world landscape in works like *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983). Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus* (1975), a fantasy and science fiction. The story loosely follows Flapping Eagle, a young Indian who receives the gift of immortality after drinking a magic fluid. In a *Times Literary Supplement* review, Mel Tilden called the book "engrossing and often wonderful" and dubbed it "science of the word..., one of those novels some people will say is too good to be science fiction, even though it contains other universes, dimensional doorways, alien creatures and more than one madman."

His second book, *Midnight's Children*, an allegory which chronicles the history of modern India through the lives of 1,001 children born with the country's first hour of independence from Great Britain on August 15, 1947. This book deals with India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. Robert Towers, New York Times critic said, "Of the country's stupendous Indian past, with its pantheon, its epics, and its wealth of folklore...while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present." *Midnight's Children* won for him the Booker of Bookers prize in 1993. In 2008 it was selected as The Best of Bookers. *Midnight's Children* is also the only Indian

novel on *Times'* list of the hundred best English-language novels since its founding in 1923.

Midnight's Children recounts the transitional phase of British colonialism to Independent India. The whole story is evinced by numerous individuals who were gifted with magical powers. Saleem Sinai, the narrator volitionally tells his story to Padma, his wife and to the readers. The story is about his forefather's personal history blending with Indian history with his own narrative. Saleem's arrival in the world in midnight August 15, 1947, the exact time of the declaration of India's independence. At a simple level, the novel is the story of Saleem Sinai and at a subtle level this is the story of his country where Saleem is important as an individual, a representative of Independence and a literary mechanism. Saleem hints that when his body falls apart, he will crumble into 630 million pieces, then 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 amalgamation of the illusion and the realism is an important aspect of magical realism. Right from the beginning 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 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, p13); he also say 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 came across the fantastical events like the 1001 midnight's children with various magical gifts; Tai Bibi, the demimondaine who claims to be 512 years old and she can assume the body odor of any person is not something we can see in real life. Saleem's mother's fear of getting a baby who will have cauliflower in its head instead of brain; Saleem's telepathic power and later his ability to smell emotions, which stemmed from his grandfather Adam, who also had the same large and magical nose. Because of this magical nose he was saved from getting killed in Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

Saleem has to contend with his personal trajectory. His family is active in this, as they begin a number of migrations and endure the numerous wars which plague the subcontinent. During this period he also suffers from amnesia until he enters a quasi-mythological exile in the

jungle of Sundarbans, where he is re-endowed with his memory. In doing so, he reconnects with his childhood friends. Saleem later becomes involved with the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay's „cleansing“ of the Jama Masjid slum. For a time Saleem is held as a political prisoner; these passages contain scathing criticisms of Indira Gandhi's overreach during the Emergency as well as what Rushdie seems to see as a personal lust for power bordering on godhood. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the *Midnight's Children*, and there is little left for Saleem to do but pick up the few pieces of his life he may still find and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his still-young nation; a chronicle written for his son, who, like his father, is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history.

Saleem uses magical realism, with its blending of mythology, realism, fantastic elements, and history, to tell hi(s)tory, 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. Rushdie used fantasy as a method of producing intensified images of reality. He uses this intensified images of reality' in it to portray the happenings preceding and flowing India's independence. The desperate materials pertaining to those times of political upheaval, popular upsurge, growing optimism, and chaotic developments that often bordered on the fantastic could not have been woven together by any other method but that of fantasy.

Rushdie uses the technique of magical realism to solve the problems of postcoloniality because people would like to create their identities, histories, stories, beliefs, customs and

tradition, and to share it with other people. The novel focuses on Saleem's personal and familial events and by doing so it actually discovers Indian historical events; Saleem's birth and death and in between perpendicularly comparing it with India, in various aspects such as 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. The novel portrays the anarchy of the British power over India and Indians, 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.

Hybridity plays an important role in *Midnight's Children* because every aspect of the novel is filled by blending different elements and characteristics. 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 post-coloniality. Saleem, who struggles for personal identity, becomes a symbolic counterpart to India, which struggles to reunite its multiple nationhood 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.

Metaphor, the most used traits of magic realist fiction, takes this novel to a greater heights. On the whole this novel can interpret and read as an allegory of the history of India. The entire evolves and revolves around Saleem Sinai, who believes that because he was born on the stroke of midnight of August 15th, 1947, which is exactly when Indian gained

independence, his story and that of India are inextricably linked. Thus Saleem believes that events in his life, whether or not created by Saleem himself, are always entangled with the web of events that took place in the nation of India.

The language of fantasy is not representational. Like any other postmodern fiction, the language of *Midnight's Children* is not representational. It does not represent facts of what is real; instead it fabricates facts and the real. The other traits of fantasy is overt violation of what is accepted as possible or probable, true or fact. For example, like the mythological characters, Tai the eternal boatman is ageless, Saleem's mother's fear of getting a child who will have cauliflower in its head instead of brain; Saleem's telepathic power and his ability to smell emotions and intentions.

The novel is based on metaphorical meaning: the allegory of Saleem-as-India is what the novel revolves around. Nevertheless, Rushdie makes sure to also destabilize that form of knowledge, to refrain from claiming authority for metaphorical meaning. Rushdie's novel, above all, questions everything in order to make sure nothing gains total authority, and nothing is deemed more important than anything else. The magic realist adaptation of traditional (hi)stories is used in *Midnight's Children* to criticize any claim of total authority or absolute truth.

Conclusion

Magic realism uses traditional storytelling as an important and useful tool in expressing opinions or transferring knowledge via literature, which is significant because in the indigenous cultures of storytelling had a great importance. Magic realism is also used to undermine the important status of historical narrative. *Midnight's Children*, which has

constructed an alternative version of an important historical narrative unveils the fabricated nature of such narrative. Although Western historiography is intended to portray factual truth, its narrative is, of course, always constructed which would make its reliance on truth doubtful from a Western point of view.

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 post-coloniality. *Midnight's Children* uses the technique of magical realism to solve the problems of post-coloniality 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.

Works Cited

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. Print.

Danow, David K.. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. Print.

Earnshaw, Steven. *Beginning Realism*. 1st Indian ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Print

Gale. *Literary Movements for Students*. Cengage Learning. USA. 2009.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. Random House, 2005. E-book.

Wilson, Keith. "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility." *Critical Quarterly* 26.3 (1984): 23-37. Web. 29 January 2016.