

‘NATION’ FROM A CHILD’S PERSPECTIVE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN* BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

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Abstract

The research paper attempts to study the representation of Nation from a child’s perspectivewhich interestingly shows a different side of the Nation. It will look into the multifarious issues in the making of a nation from a child’s perspective in a postcolonial context. And it also focuses on the ways the author further gives the child a space of their own in his work, in order to bring out the several issues by making them a part and a witness in the construction of the nation, since the time before and after the colonial rule. Narrating a work of fiction from a child’s perspective is a strategy used by the author in order to give a work that is non-judgemental. The child speaks whatever he/she witnesses the way it is, in spite of manipulating the facts. Here, the author of fiction plays an essential part in giving the child a space and a voice in exhibiting the world to us in a very clear manner. In this way, they also give the expression to their own childhood experiences by using the child protagonist as a strategy. Within Postcolonial Studies, Nation has been a most discussed and debated category and several research has been done on the concept of Nation as represented in Indian English fiction. However, the interesting area of research that offers further scope for exploration is the

concept of Nation from a child's perspective. The methodology applied, is an in-depth study of the postcolonial fiction, Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie. Through this paper, I will focus upon the important issues that needs attention and will investigate certain questions, like; Why does the postcolonial author employ a child protagonist in their literary narratives? What is the effect and outcome of using the child consciousness while interrogating the nation?

Keywords: Nation, Nationality, Narrative Strategy, Child Consciousness, Postcolonial Fiction.

Introduction

Nation is a broad term that emerges through enormous debate and various scholars have discussed the term nation in different contexts. There cannot be one perspective or meaning of nation, as across disciplines and methodologies different understandings of nation will emerge. With regard to the understanding of the concept nation, in one of his essays, "*What is a nation?*"(1990) Ernest Renan defines nation as an entity based on acts of free will of the individuals of nation forming a collective identity as;

“A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (19).

The India which I will focus upon is no more an Undivided nation, it took birth on the eve of 15th August 1947 after it got separated from Pakistan on religious grounds leading to the drastic Partition. There is no such demarcation like ‘us/them’ or ‘insider/outsider’ or ‘superior/inferior’ in this independent India. In his book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*(1998) Shashi Tharoor remarks, “We are all minorities in independent India. No one group can assert its dominance without making minorities of the majority of Indians.” There are various groups who try to dominate the others leading to ‘ideological resistance’ that is ultimately poisoning millions of minds and “An India that denies itself to some of us could end up being denied to all of us” which would lead to a “second Partition – and a partition in the Indian soul would be as bad as a partition in the Indian soil.” (78)

The debate on ‘Nation’ is highly contested on several grounds and we need to debate it further because it has overwhelmed us in various ways. Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to the book *The Location of Culture*(2004) says; “The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.” (10) The line essentializes the structural role played by history in the

development of any Nation. In this way, the nation and their narration play a vital role in strengthening their citizens. The postcolonial writers give us a closer image of the Indian nation in their respective works. And history is the fundamental base of every novel being applied in the scrutiny of the ever-evolution of Nation. Everybody shares their own experience in their works and they have given voice to the vulnerable sections of society.

It is now seventy-five years since India got emancipated from the rule of the British empire. In many instances, however, Independence has not brought the current nations the desired benefits and results that were expected. The burgeoning of national liberation movements had given birth to a number of serious discourses and troublesome issues throughout the period of the national Independence struggles. These issues were not fixed with the coming of Independence at the beginning of the 1950s although the arguments in the ideological sphere undoubtedly took a new pattern in response to the charged state of affairs. The advancement of some of these uncertain issues were formulated by the tensions operating between the nation, on the one hand, and international forces and oppressions, on the other.

This was a milieu that Frantz Fanon had already commented in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), where he wrote;

nationalism, that magnificent hymn which roused the masses against the oppressor, will collapse in the wake of independence. Nationalism is not a political doctrine, it is not a program. If we really wish to avoid the country slipping backwards, stalling and falling apart, there has to be rapid transition from national consciousness. The nation has no existence apart from through a programme drawn up by a revolutionary leadership and adopted with lucidity and enthusiasm by the masses. There is a constant need to situate a national effort within the general context of the underdeveloped countries. (142-143)

Here are encapsulated some of the key issues of post-independence: the difficulties and significance of economic development; the need to transcend nationalism as a political ideology; the need for a fundamental change in culture at the proper level to arise; the importance of the transnational and international perspective. On top of all these matters, the greatest hurdle for India today is the 'question of identity' which is an intimidating one. Each group or community demanding their own space, in which they can feel they belong to. For India to get through with an effectual democracy, it needs to be acknowledgeable of its multifaceted population in order to hold the various identities under a single umbrella. In simple terms, it would be like giving rise to new victims and new minorities, if India tends to succumb to each demand.

Use of Child in Postcolonial Fiction

Postcolonial writers implicated the practice of silencing gender and class question, perception of the role of women in the novel, the role of government and politics in the society, consciousness raising process through fiction by using the child's consciousness and understanding. As Dr. Meenakshi Bharat, argues in her groundbreaking work *The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Fiction*(2003) about the role of child and the child's place in Postcolonial Fiction;

“... the child had become an important vehicle for the postmodern, de-centered consciousness. The limitations imposed by the comparatively cohesive, integrated personality of the adult were now being surmounted by the use of the child who seemed to have a fluid, protean and a chimerical relationship with the world. Nothing had congealed; therefore, the possibilities were infinite.” (2-3)

The study attempts to perceive these possibilities, and to explore the varied use of the child and childhood in fiction, in order to give voice to the various issues that were neglected.

The most innocent and susceptible human beings in literature are children and with their little life experience and a narrow understanding, perhaps, can be said to be overtly sincere and pliable. Moreover, by using the child's voice, the author proposes a seemingly fresh or emerging perspective on incidents that hitherto have an established history. Children have a very little rational thinking, and they also lack a comprehensive understanding of even their own experiences. However, these are the key attributes of children that build up a unique narration. A young child's incapacity and powerlessness to process their experiences allows the reader to do so for themselves. Further, children are usually not able to change or adjust in the situation in which they find themselves.

While introducing an absolutely unique storyline into an overwhelming precedence of accepted history, child narration can be used as a tool by the author to place himself within the accepted history. A child's viewpoint calls attention to the lack of control the victim had over their dire circumstances. Moreover, it is difficult for a reader to criticize a child for their experiences, magnifying the tragedy of the event. It allows the author to record the events simply by what happened, giving the reader an opportunity to draw their own conclusions. I would argue that child narration is an influential tool used by the authors to further their investigation of the distinctive genuine truth. Telling the stories from the perspective of a young mind grants the authors a sense of accountability.

It was Jean Jacques Rousseau who brought the child to the center as a symbol and gave them the importance they deserved, as an individual. In his book, *Emile; or, Concerning Education* (1889), he asserted:

“We pity the state of infancy; we do not perceive that the human race would have perished if man had not begun by being a child” (12).

He further states;

“Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men. If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe and tasteless, and liable to early decay; we shall have young savants and old children. Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling. Nothing shows less sense than to try to substitute our own methods for these” (Rousseau 52).

The use of a child’s perspective as a literary device was an invention of the late eighteenth-century. In pre-Romantic literature, children hardly got an opportunity to express themselves. Galia Benziman, in her famous article *The Child’s Perspective: Hardy, Joyce and the Redefinition of Childlike Romantic Sensibilities* (2013) gives us a better outline of the emergence of the Child’s voice into literature as;

“As the first writers in English to envision the child as capable of significant articulation, Blake and Wordsworth defined their poetry against the prevailing puritan assumption, so dominant in late eighteenth-century education, that the child had no words and views of its own. Blake and Wordsworth used the child’s voice as a rich poetic device, a means for social critique, and a psychological introspective medium” (153).

She further states;

“Following the educational theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, their views of childhood as a stage of life to be valued in its own right led to their construction of an alternative childlike subjectivity, one whose freshly distinct mental, moral and cognitive perspective served to defamiliarize and reshape the interaction between the self and its natural and social surroundings. For these poets, and several nineteenth-century novelists who followed (particularly Dickens, the Brontës and George Eliot), the child became a means for authorial self-analysis and introspection” (Benziman 153-54).

With the growth in the emphasis on subjective impressions, the exploration of the child’s point of view became an important aspect for the contemporary writers to revise and reconstruct a valuable kind of subjectivity. Childhood being a transient period in life held a marginal position so far. It must be noted that childhood is the fundamental block of the adult and so constitutes the

greater proportion of any society. It is this marginalisation that needs to be scrutinized. Children had a very marginal place in the past and their condition were similar to that of the woman in society as a 'Subaltern'. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *Post-colonial Studies: The key concepts* (2007) give us the meaning of Subaltern, as an 'inferior rank.'(198) No doubt children were used in the texts earlier, but their place was marginal and they simply had a faint appearance without any voice of recognition. The present-day contemporary writer has brought the child to the centre and has given them a voice to represent themselves and the world around them.

In Indian literature, the focus upon children was witnessed in the postcolonial period, whereby the writers took advantage of their marginal position, highlighting the various issues and shortcomings of the independent nation. Starting from the period before Independence various writers like, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao experimented in their works the very understanding of a child in relation to the nation entailing the society. In this paper, my central focus is to look upon the Nation in the postcolonial context in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie from a child's perspective which fascinatingly shows a contrasting side of the nation.

The child has been shifted to the centre from the periphery and in spite of being represented by the adult world, they represent the world around them and scrutinise the minutest transformations taking place. With the new social order and the changes associated with the postcolonial nation, the child turns out to be an important subject, and childhood, a remarkable theme in fiction. Moreover, the individual and former experience of the postcolonial novelist, such as, Salman Rushdie, turns out to be exceptionally important and needs to be investigated because it influenced the representation of the child and the use of their consciousness to a greater extent.

Sudhir Kakar, in his most acclaimed book *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1978) confirms the deployment of child in the social and cultural context of India. He states;

“different cultures shape the development of their members in different ways, ‘choosing’ whether childhood, youth, or adulthood is to be a period of maximum or minimum stress.

In India... it is early childhood rather than adulthood which is the ‘golden age’ of individual life history” (10).

The postcolonial writers give us a better scope in understanding the postcolonial transitions as well as colonial experience by putting forward the potential of childhood as a narrative strategy. I will look into the postcolonial text *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981 by Salman Rushdie that highlights the prevalent issues in contemporary society. The child is the representative of the

postcolonial nation and it gives the author an opportunity, to share his viewpoint and communicate with the readers in accordance to the society.

“Midnight’s Children is a brilliant based on the liberating imagination of independence itself, with all its anomalies and contradictions working themselves out.”

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (260).

Midnight’s Children’s main concern is the idea of India, the moment India got Independence. The discipline of history specializes in the creation of past (that might or else plainly be a random collection of events) in the form of a narrative that determines a causal sequence and logic. He makes his child narrator, Saleem visit and re-visit history in order to highlight the problems faced by the postcolonial nation. The novel builds and introduces a world that is totally different from the one constructed by the British, thereby attempting to reject the colonial version of India. He gives us an image of the new version of Indian citizens and history in order to give us an access to the greater truth to Indian images and history. Rushdie re-thinks and re-imagines history in order to realign the postcolonial identity that further problematizes the Identity. The shattered identity of the once colonized citizens is difficult to reestablish as they form a kind of hybrid that is difficult to locate. As Sarah Habib Bounse suggests in her thesis *Hybridity and Postcoloniality: Formal, Social and Historical Innovations in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children* (2009) as;

‘. . . . the novel explores the problems of postcoloniality, depicted in the novel as the difficulties in assigning one’s point of personal or national origin, the problems in determining one’s personal and national history, and the impossibility of finding and achieving personal and national “authentic” identity.’ (2)

By creating history, the author questions the identity while acquainting the readers with the problems of postcolonial identity through the interconnectedness of the forms of hybridity. According to Bhabha, Hybridity is the emergence of new cultural forms of multiculturalism. Perceiving colonialism to be something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures persistently intrude on the present, demanding us to transform our apprehension of cross-cultural relations. In his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994), he states;

“If the jargon of our times – postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism – has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the ‘post’ to indicate sequentiality – after-feminism; or polarity – anti-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment.” (6)

Since the beginning, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* hints at the ambiguous condition of the modern nation. The novel explores the idea of nation and nationality largely based upon the experiences and observations of the child protagonist, Saleem Sinai who interweaves Indian history along with his family history. He remarks, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape" (3). The application of magical realism serves the purpose better as multiple characters come in contact with each other in a single platform and impart their individual prospects and historical accounts. Through the child narrator, Rushdie intimates us wisely yet tactfully, with India's postcoloniality. The idea of postcolonial India is what Bhabha relates as, "a 'separate' space, a space of separation – – which has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of 'origins.' It is precisely as a separation from origins and essences that this colonial space is constructed." (171) This 'space of separation' emerges through "'Entstellung', a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition." (Bhabha 149) This process turns out to be the product of colonial powers as they attempt to secure their control over the colonized lands, or it may arise as the postcolonial people seek to detach themselves from their colonizers.

As the narrator's history of the new nation begins, the other histories obstruct. The contestation to control the center is virulent, and Saleem realizes himself to be competing with politicians, "Indira is India", and the rich gurus, such as, Lord Khusro Khusrovand , formerly known as Cyrus, a childhood friend of Saleem. "When set beside Cyrus's India, my own version seems almost mundane." (373) Saleem attempts to suppress the anxiety that becomes apparent from Shiva's comments – public versus private, community versus the individual, centrality versus marginality that ruins the modern nation. The novelist conveys his own discomfort and dissatisfaction with the postcolonial nation through the voice of the protagonist, since he was a baby. Josna E. Rege in her article 'Victim into Protagonist? Midnight's Children and the Post-Rushdie national narratives of the Eighties' (1997) shares her perspective, "Despite its conceptual freshness and vitality, *Midnight's Children* remains very much emotionally committed to the narrative of nation." (366) and that the novel "romanticizes the Congress Party Ideal of 'unity in diversity'" (360). It proves not only Rushdie's discontentment towards the nation but it also highlights the exploitation of the postcolonial nation because he realizes that whoever came to lead it were, as Timothy Brennan proposes in his work, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (1989) as; "sell-outs and power brokers" (27).

The 'Midnight Children Conference' inaugurated by child narrator indicates numerous prospects for the new nation. Identities are built upon differences, likewise; national identity is strengthened by creating differences and, at times asserted through violence. The protagonist stresses on the idea of a community as a 'mixture of voices' in an enclosed area. He says, "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (145). In the incorporation of the metaphor 'swallowing' itself raises the problems of boundaries, supremacy and marginality that affect the ideas of modern nation. The incessant demand of destiny and the holy past stories makes the boundaries of nation and nationality more permissible. As Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Baby Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young" and that his life is "the mirror of our own." (167) which means that baby Saleem is the representative of Independent India. Although India as a nation is a latest and an imported creation. Sunil Khilnani writes in the introduction of his book *The Idea of India* (2012);

"For all its magnificent antiquity and historical depth, contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world. The fundamental agencies and ideas of modernity – European colonial expansion, the state, nationalism, democracy, economic development – all have shaped it." (3)

The narrator, Saleem Sinai himself is a hybrid character, born to an Indian mother and a British father symbolizing Indian colonization by the Britishers. The text is not only about the struggle and emergence of Independent India but it also recounts the partition of India. Its central theme is the socio-political disorders, corruption, religious inequality or abhorrence, violence and the self-indulgence of Indira Gandhi's Emergency. Syed Amanuddin in his article *The Novels of Salman Rushdie: Mediated Reality as Fantasy* (1989) says, "Midnight's Children mythologizes the very consciousness of independent India with its memories of the past, dreams of the future, and harsh realities of the present." (42). The novel looks into the difficulties and issues faced by the postcolonial countries (in our case India) and its struggles in identifying one's personal and national origin, personal or national history, and one's personal identity and one's connection to the national identity.

Saleem's life and the lives of the surviving five hundred and eighty-one children indicates the generation belonging to the post-independent period. Therefore, Saleem's life is inevitably, connected to the political, national and religious events of the nation. The children born in and around India's Independence carried supernatural gift, likewise Saleem carried the gift of

telepathy that served as a promising future for India. But nothing seemed to be working and the dreams and aspirations of the population were shattered by the corrupt parties of the nation.

With his telepathic power, Saleem connects and communicates with the other midnight's children. He establishes the Midnight's Children Conference, holds meeting, assembles hundreds of exceptional children, and attempts to find meaning of the gifts they possess. He discovers that those who are born near the stroke of midnight possess more powerful gifts than the other children. Shiva of the Knees, Saleem's nemesis and Parvati, AKA Parvati-the-witch are the two children with remarkable gifts and played the major part in Saleem's narrative. Thus, the text gives voice to the teeming population of India.

As Theo L. D'Haen states in his work, *Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers* (1995), "In Rushdie's novel the focus lies with the Indians themselves, and with their views of their country and society." With the use of magic realism, "the children born in India at the very moment the country gained its independence from England, communicating with each other in such a magic realist way, literally give voice to an entire subcontinent, a proper voice this time, as the subjects of their own story not as the objects of an English colonial novel." (198-99) The cultural and character diversity in the text describes the cultural and social diversity of Indian citizens, allowing new images of colonial and postcolonial nation to emerge. With the shifting relationships among themselves, the characters transform, alter and change, and become socially hybridized.

Earlier, the children openly shared their views upon the nation but after becoming aware of their parent's religious, traditional beliefs and cultural indoctrination, the assemblage of diverse children dissolves breaking further communication. By giving voice to the multiple differing characters and allowing them to articulate their own histories, the author creates a new postcolonial history, thus giving the characters a chance to express themselves. Saleem's narration and his family's history is directly linked to the nation's creation due to his birth "on the stroke of midnight", which serves as a means to assert his own power as a postcolonial citizen.

Assuming his role as a creator of young India, he travels to far off lands and come to terms with various lives;

“. . . the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow *making them happen* . . . which is to say, 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.” (86)

The children discuss various topics that the adult world seems not to question and neglect, giving rise to ignorance and ambiguity. To Saleem, the children seem to be “a many-headed monster”(131), babbling in several languages, symbolising the multiplicity of India. Looking at things from one thousand and one ways again raises the question of multiple identities. The MCC represents the political debate going on in the high bourgeois setting of his childhood and also serves as a basis for imagining a public arena in a postcolonial milieu where people of contrasting social classes and racial backgrounds meet in order to discuss or debate upon matters of public importance. At one point, Saleem states that the midnight’s children can be made to represent “everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation,” in fact the Conference has its core in a nationalizing industrial economy. The question arises, whether the children are “the true hope of freedom” or “the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind” (278) -or, whether the MCC is a real political ideal, or an illusory ideology that meet the interests of an oppressive state apparatus.

The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru seems to be in an ambiguous state while making his speech on the midnight of India’s Independence;

‘ . . . Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny; and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge – nor wholly or in full measure, but very substantially . . . ’ ‘At the stroke of midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom . . . ’ ‘A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance . . . ’ ‘We end today a period of ill-fortune . . . ’ (155-56)

15th August brought freedom but also led to the division of India, creating Pakistan that resulted into a poisonous atmosphere for both the countries. Thus, where religious fanatics ruined everything and people ran for their lives, the speech made by the Prime Minister failed to convince the people of the impending independence. “Salman Rushdie saw the Nehru-Gandhi mystique as the stuff of myth” and “Perhaps Rushdie’s is the best way to see the dynasty, as a sort of collective dream of all Indians, a dream from which the nation periodically seems about to wake, before fitfully relapsing into oneirodynia.” (Tharoor 47)

We witness Saleem, finding it hard to establish an identity after knowing the truth about his birth and embraces his several names and adopts various parents. He realizes the fundamental problem of a postcolonial society having impossibility in perceiving one’s ‘authentic’ identity.

Tharoor talks about postcolonial India and focuses upon the drawback of the Emergency where “[m]ost of the real victims of the Emergency were among the poorest classes of Indians most needed the protections of democracy. For all its chaos and confusion, our parliamentary system and its inefficient trappings were all that stood between them and the absolute power of the state.” (35) Emergency turned out to be a disastrous step in the name of development and modernization where the rich benefitted and the poor were crushed violently. It was the most unacceptable thing, at the moment of Emergency for any Indian to acknowledge that ‘Indira is India and India is Indira.’ Thus, the novel not only serves as a resistance to imperialism but also provides an alternative in realizing and accepting one’s history as it is.

Conclusion

The postcolonial Indian English novelists focus upon the issue of Nation in their narratives and they are basically engaged in a debate on the broad question- ‘what is a nation?’ Salman Rushdie redefines the nation as the imaginary homeland; where, in the case of India, multiple diversity live side-by-side without knowing each other. Saleem is a symbol of postcolonial India and represents the diversity of India. The manifold identities of Saleem reflects India’s struggle to cope up with its diversity after the colonial rule. The stratagem applied by Rushdie and the position he assumes, by emphasizing the experiences of his protagonist who belong to the marginal section of the society; evidently challenge several uniformities including the structure, geography and cultural definition of a nation.

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