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A Study on Historical Fiction as Described in Salman Rushdie's Novels

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Abstract – Post-colonial historiography and historical fiction have come to share common concerns about representation with post-modern historic-graphic met fiction where story telling along with revelation in their own narratively becomes a historical and political act. As Simon argues, post- colonial writing becomes one of the ways of subverting imperial myths by 'foregrounding the fact that history is not a set of immovable past achievements but a discourse, open to reinterpretation.'

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INTRODUCTION

Rushdie's novels are historical met fictions as they parody national myth and magic realism is the fundamental basis on which they are built. Magic Realism entertains all sorts of binary oppositions like national unification and fragmentation, personal and trivial both take their respective places in his novels, the novels move around centre and periphery, artist/entertainer, author/reader, history/myth, history/elevated are other binaries that are extensively found in Rushdie. Rushdie writes from the margin between the opposites and his magic realism subverts traditional hierarchies, in fact, he deconstructs binaries and it is only in this sense that he makes use of post-structuralism. Magic realism itself in the most polarized form is contrastingly co-existing term where 'realism' refers to something which can be empirically proved whereas the word 'magic' admits the existence of the supernatural. The combination of the two disrupts the traditional set-up and it allows in the works of Salman Rushdie the equal co-existence of binaries where neither is subversive or dominant. Many a time the unresolved ambiguities in his novels keep the character moving and the reader's interest remains captured in the progress of the plot. We can conclude most aptly that this technique lead up to an important secret behind the best literature - the balancing of opposites.

In his works he privileges a postmodern space or third principle that blends both sides of binaries: east/west, secular/religious, real/fantasy, and colonizer/colonized and foregrounds hybridity over clarity and open-endedness over closure.

Rushdie's fiction is here counter-posed as the 'other' of history because both fiction and history are discursive practices subject to questions of authorship and also because both require an act of reading before they can have meaning. The reader in both these discursive practices has to have a binocular vision to perceive

the allegorization of history. Rushdie here dismantles the historical frames to counter-pose fiction as the 'other' of history. By obliterating the line between myth and history, the novelist exposes the falsity of the conventional Western fact/fiction opposition and thus acquires the status of an itihaskar.

Another postmodernist feature Rushdie successfully attempts in his works is indeterminacy - a radical postmodern attempt to question and topple absolute and canonized concepts maintained by realism and modernism. This helps in rejecting the organic unity perceived and teleological' hegemony of the text and encourages multiplicity, de-centering, randomness, pluralism and non-elitism. Waugh further clarifies that in this way the postmodern text will also thwart the reader's attempt to produce a unified meaning. This insists on the incomplete, indeterminate and inconclusive work that is full of energy.

To sum up, we can use the words of Linda Hutcheon that such fiction consists of novels which are 'intensely self-reflective,' and re-introduce historical context into met fiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge. Like those recent theories of both history and fiction, this kind of novel. ... forces us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time.

Judith Plotz calls the novel *Midnight's Children* 'extravagant metafictional metaphor: narrative as chutney,' Rushdie's 'programmatically promiscuous contribution to the modern Indian historical novel'. Plotz cites *The Great Indian Novel* as one of the recent historical novels which continue 'Rushdie's task of clarifying history, of representing post-colonial Indian's in self-reflective post-modern texts.'

The metaphor of the 'perforated' sheet admits the basic fragmentary nature of human beings, an

inherent incapacity to see things in their wholeness. Just as the grandfather could look at his future wife only in bits and parts and his mother too could love her husband only in fragments so also Saleem, admits that his perception and understanding of things could be no more than fragmentary. It makes historical knowledge suggest that we should be fully alive to the limitations within which it has to be comprehended. He owes this recreation of the past to the memory which has its own special kind.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

In the varied essays written in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie discusses ideas like God, religion, post-modernism, authority, Islam, fiction, and freedom of expression but this critical work by Rushdie is about the grand narrative and who should have power over it, because those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.

Laurence Lerner's statement that 'Most novels are made from the mixture of memory, introspection, observation and the use of documents' is applicable to Rushdie because he relies heavily on memory's truth and imagination. Knowing the limitations of this method of creating imaginative truth, he makes his narrator a suspect in his narration. The mistakes committed by Saleem Sinai, Rushdie tells us 'are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstances, and his vision is fragmentary.'

This process of reclamation of the past through memory with distortions virtually turns it into fiction and is Rushdie's clarification of history. He describes this process thus: ...in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I'm afraid, with the shadows of imperfection.

Even when he finds an error in the narrative account he, instead of correcting it, takes it to be the uniqueness of his construction, which lies in its novelty of presentation and interpretation. Hence, instead of becoming the Proustian kind, his novels become novels about memory which is why the narrator is so suspect and makes all kinds of mistakes, some of which he perceives and some of which he does not. Memory plays extraordinary tricks and helps us to reconstruct the vanished world from the bits of archeological remains. It exalts certain trivial things and they gain importance just because they have been lodged in the mind. History seen through the memory becomes odd with the distortion, irrelevant things shine and big ones take a back seat. In the twentieth century curiosity and queries have taken the place of acceptance prevalent in the nineteenth century. Saleem pretends to be an omniscient narrator with mistakes in his narration which is often found fallible

and it refutes his omniscience. Like the Proustian world 'synthetic intuition,' that is, memory, Rushdie's fictional world richly conjures up the world of concrete facts into a timeless world of memory and intuition. The drift into a transcendental state of timelessness is most singularly achieved by language. It is in the endless association in language, myth and symbol that the world of timelessness is ultimately realized e.g. the world of Kashmir and the anonymous questions are timeless constructs.

Rushdie himself made clear that his target when writing this magnificent work was very far from rigorous historio-graphic recording, that his real aim was highlighting the immense value of personal history as opposed to the official versions of it that pervade scientific studies in the name of truth. In his famous article entitled "'Errata': or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*," he outspokenly states his strategy of parody and anti-historical inaccuracy for this purpose: When I began the novel (as I've written elsewhere) my purpose was somewhat Proustian. Time and migration had placed a double filter between me and my subject.... But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool. Aruna Srivastava has rightly pointed out that the Rushdie approach to history is not so much Proustian as it is Foucaultian, for genealogy plays a fundamental role in the reconstruction of the narrator's history.

According to Marshall, the efforts of historiographical met fictionists are similar to Foucaultian counter memory. Counter memory is the process of reading history against the grain, of taking an active role in the interpretation of history rather than passively viewing it (Marshall). The writer constantly interrogates the past and involves the reader in the interpretative process. He therefore renews memory since forgetting is a way of streamlining 'other voices.' This is a stand that most 'excentric' cultures take since the very act of remembering will enable them to rewrite not 'his-story' but 'their story.'

The fictional work of Rushdie can be understood also by the term 'Suffocation' coined by Raymond Feuerman as his fiction combines features of radical self-reflexivity, surrealism and the French nouveau roman and they celebrate the unreal and the real on the same platform. But Wilde's *Medication*, though less radical a term, can be best applied to his work. Because his work presents a 'via media between the extremes of realism and reflexivity,' his works of mid-fiction offers solution to three extreme stances of narrative - self-reflexivity's narcissism, modernism's stream of consciousness and traditional realism's naive representation. They accept the world's incoherence and fragmentation instead of using art to control it. The self-referentiality, which occurs in certain passages of his novels, is characteristically post-

modern. The narrators are very self-aware of their roles in the narrative, and at various times 'step out of the work' as it were, to communicate with the reader. Rushdie abandons linear narrative in all the three works under study *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Moor's Last Sigh* and merges fact with fantastic.

Midnight's Children is a novel that is at once experimental, confessional, polemical and subjective; a clever blend of history, autobiography, political allegory and fantasy. The magical aura of fantasy is superimposed on a world of history and facts. Fantasy is brought forth with the birth of the pioneering Saleem Sinai and his imaginary *Midnight's Children's Club* (like the *Marylebone Cricket Club*). Their activities and their world are realized in the rarefied atmosphere of fantasy and reality.

Mistakes and inaccuracies result from a fallible memory compounded by Saleem's idiosyncratic character. *Midnight's Children* was not meant to be an authoritative history of post-independence India even though some segments of Rushdie's South Asian public wanted to read it in that way. Instead, Saleem, the unreliable narrator, reflects the difficulty of really remembering what the truth is. Saleem, like his creator Rushdie, suggests that imaginative truth is both honorable and suspect. Rushdie often writes of the mirror reflecting the world, and Saleem here uses the broken mirror of memory, some fragments reflecting truthfully, others only refracting distortions and some completely lost. With the process of selection, alteration, exaggeration, and elimination the account of any event can be diminished or enlarged. The self-reflexive acknowledgements of Saleem regarding his friend Shiva that he had 'allowed his account too much aspace ...' is a point in evidence.

Saleem is also shown cutting up bits and parts of newspaper headlines to prepare a note of warning for Commander Sabarmati - his 'first attempt at rearranging history - on to a sheet of paper...'. This, in the chapter *The National Longing for Form*, Timothy Brennan compares it with a movie screen of which Saleem talks of, elsewhere: Like the newspaper clippings- another mass media form out of which Saleem 'rearranges history' in his communication with Captain Sabarmati - the heroic images of the screen are composed of confusing fragments whose abstract arrangement is obvious when seen up close.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY:

According to Saleem, he learnt his first lesson of life while being nursed and perhaps that became the most important principle of his narration. When Amina and Mary, the ayah was trying to induce blinking in the newborn he learnt that 'nobody can face the world with his eyes open all the time' - that explains his missing links, cuttings, deletions and substitutions. And though

we blink 'it's amazing how much you can remember when you try.' Through the blinking eye and amazing memory he recollects the snapshots in his mind about Bombay: its shape that is like a hand but the city in reality is a mouth devouring all food and Indian talent. It is a 'glamorous leech' producing nothing except films.

Three historical aspects of the novel are surcharged with shame in his next novel by the same name i.e. *Shame*. In this brilliant novel, first published in 1983, Rushdie gives us a lively and colorful mixture of history, art, language, politics, and religion. Set in a country 'not quite Pakistan,' the story centers on the family of two men -one a celebrated warrior, the other a debauched playboy- engaged in a protracted duel that is played out in the political landscape of their country.

The shame of the novel is firstly the shame of the murky politics that created an untenable country- 'the famous moth-eaten partition that chopped up the old country and handed a few insect-nibbled slices of it...'. The second aspect of shame dealt in the novel is the shame of cultural transplant that is reflected in Rushdie himself who becomes a 'voyeur'- projected in his alter ego, Omar Khayyam Shakil. Finally, and perhaps the most prominent intended theme is the shame of the social mores of the backward, feudal, superstitious Islamic society that multiplies shame on shame through limitless' repression breeding violence. It creates psychological horrors, both in private and public life. That *Shame* is a hybrid novel is problematised by its relation to allegorical forms of writing. It is pointed out that the text shifts between reality/ unreality; Pakistani Peccavistan; fiction and factual narrative interventions, and this is evidence of the strongly representational mode. Examples are plenty in Rani Harappa's eighteen shawls, each of which depicts allegorical frames. Critics like Brennan insist on Rushdie being an allegorist, relying on the mode to convey the social, political, and national arguments of the author and justify authorial intervention in the texts.

Rushdie often writes of the mirror reflecting the world, and Saleem here uses the broken mirror of memory, some fragments reflecting truthfully, others only refracting distortions, and some completely lost. As in *Midnight's Children*, in *Shame* also Rushdie reflects his version of the reality of Pakistan through fragments of broken mirrors in a zig-zag fashion. The author has 'learned Pakistan in slices, the same way as' he has 'learned my growing sister....' (*Shame*) Pointing out the difference of historical representation In *Shame* from *Midnight's Children* Timothy Brennan writes: For Saleem Sinai (although he doubts his own motives) tries to incorporate multitudes, while Bhutto, Zia and others only reduce real events to their size. As though fearing reprisals, *Shame* does not present

history openly but hides it in allusive references to the past which are buried in casual place names and family titles and ironic reincarnations of figures from legend.

History in all its aspects - important events, major views, minor views, the political, and the individual-comes under Rushdie's scrutiny in his novels. Palimpsest suggests that there is always the possibility of subversion because, despite attempts to completely 'erase' what is written, trace of the original remains visible. Erasure also implies censorship. It is a concept that has an imbricative, osmotic, overlapping nature. It defies authenticity, absolutism and purity. In Rushdie's magic realism, myth helps to strengthen the functionality of the fiction; history justifies the claim of the text on actuality. These twin elements of myth and history have come to play a dominant role in postmodernist novels like *Midnight's Children*. The rational and linear world of Western realist fiction and convention are faced with impossibilities by the native narrative which is well grounded.

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