Dr. Marsela TURKU¹

SALMAN RUSHDIE’S POST-COLONIAL IMPULSES AND POST-MODERN TECHNIQUES²

Abstract

Salman Rushdie is a British writer whose force and originality derives from his strong and demanding voice. Rushdie turned his back on the Victorian and Indian tradition, favouring the post-colonial impulses and attitudes, delightfully employing the post-modern techniques such as discontinued narrative, cinematic images and metaphors, mirror games, myths and legends. His novel *Midnight Children* is surrealist fiction that deals with history of India from the year 1910 to the declaration of the emergency in 1976. The book is endowed with magical powers of telepathy which allow the narrator to clearly review himself and the world around him. The history is often mingled with unexpected and the inexplicable events, real places are reintroduced in a distorted form; mythology is combined with elements of fairy tale, dream and reality. The author explores the boundaries of fiction and reality, whereas the book is characterized by a wonderful mixture of languages by even creating a modern epic. The characters are transformed into symbols and archetypes so that their stories are interpreted at some levels in the same time: real and fantastic, metaphorical and symbolic. Thus the paper aims to read and utterly analyze *Midnight Children* focusing on the post-modern techniques and the “magical realism” used by Salman Rushdie. The paper will briefly present the features of post-modern techniques and analyse the originality in this novel.

*Key Words:* Post-modern, post-Victorian, magic realism, dream, mythology etc.

¹ turku_marsela@yahoo.com; “Aleksander Moisiu” University; Department of Foreign Languages ‘Durrës, Albania
² Paper presented in “3 International Conference ‘Foreign Languages in a Global World, Linguistics, Literature, Didactics’ Durrës, June 2017”
Introduction

The Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie is recognized as one of the most controversial authors of the 20th century literature, but he mainly stands out among other writers who successfully integrate magic realism with post-colonial device in their works. He is recognized as one of the most distinguished and important representatives of magic realism outside Latin America and he is one of the most notable postcolonial writers. Midnight’s Children is a text which is based in the combination of two literary elements: the narrative technique of magic realism to the post colonial elements.

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms defines magic realism as a “kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical elements are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the reliable tone of objective, realistic report”. Magic realism mixes and disrupts ordinary everyday reality with strange and miraculous powers by transforming the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. Where time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and there is not a clear cut between the present, the past and the future whereas the unreal seems an integrated part of the reality. Magic realism aims to grasp the paradox of the union of opposites like life and death and (the pre-colonial) past versus the (post-industrial) present. Magic realism is set in a normal, modern world. Thus the magical elements are intermingled into a realistic atmosphere in order to better understand reality. These magical events/powers are explained like normal occurrences which allows the real or reality and the fantastic or magic to be accepted in the same stream of thought. Realistic elements, characters, setting merge with the unexpected and the inexplicable and in which elements of fairy story, mythology or dreams, mingle with the everyday reality, often in mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern. Magic realism is often connected to magical Indian mentality.

In 1981 Salman Rushdie published his second novel Midnight’s Children which is about India’s struggle for independence from British colonialism. In this novel, he retraces the Bombay and India of his own childhood not as autobiography but as cultural history and it is constructed around individuals and their involvement in the historical process. He uses tales from various genres – fantasy, mythology, religion, oral tradition etc. Midnight’s Children revolves around Saleem Sinai, the narrator protagonist of the story and ten thousand children born in the midnight of India’s independence. The success of this novel made Rushdie a celebrity all over the world. This book was awarded with The Man Booker Prize, it won the James Tait Black Memorial prize in 1981 and it was also awarded with the Booker of Bookers prize and the best of all time winners in 1993 and 2008.
Magic Realism in *Midnight’s Children*

Magic realism entails an implied criticism of society and this is a mode primarily about and for the geographically, socially and economically marginalized people or countries. Therefore, magic realism’s creates an alternative world to restore the reality and to challenge established viewpoints. Thus, magic realist texts are dissident and rebellious texts, protesting against socially dominant forces.

The first manifestation of magic realism in the novel is the character of Tai, or more specifically, Tai’s claim to being from ancient times. Tai stubbornly emphasizes to being so old that he has “watched the mountains being born” and “seen emperors die” (13). The apparent reason why Rushdie had Tai ostensibly reveals impossible longevity is that he wanted Tai to represent the India of old. This theory is supported well by Tai’s contempt for Aadam’s bag of foreign medical supplies from Europe. Tai’s use of the word “now” implies that he is making a comparison between the past with which he is familiar and which he trusts and the present which is uncertain and he scorns. Tai symbolically represents the traditions of pre-colonial India and because of this he continually asserts ancient origin.

A second example of magic realism is the story of “The Hummingbird” Mian Abdullah’s assassination. It is said of Abdullah that “His body was hard and the long curved blades had trouble killing him; one broke on a rib” (58). In this scenario, Abdullah’s physical toughness would represent the difficulty in suppressing the culture of an entire country. Furthermore, his humming represents an urgent immediacy to take action, whereas the dogs symbolize the action against the British colonizer that would eventually take place.

In *Midnight’s Children*, history is presented through Saleem Sinai, thus reproduced mainly through individual experiences. For Saleem, born at the very moment of India’s independence, his life becomes interlinked with the social, political, national, and even religious events of his time. Reality and real events are provided by the unique perspective of Sinai and his family members for the readers to view and understand what have happened during the period of Indian independence.

Another instance of magical realism is Saleem’s gift of having an incredible sense of smell, allowing him to determine others emotions and thoughts, inherited from his grandfather Adam, who also had the same large nose and magical gift. It is Adam’s sensitive nose that saved him from being killed in the JallianwalaBagh Massacre:
"As the fifty-one men march down the alleyway a tickle replaces the itch in my grandfather’s nose… Adam Aziz ceases to concentrate on the events around him as the tickle mounts to unbearable intensities. As Brigadier Dyer issues a command the sneeze hits my grandfather full in the face. “Yaaakh-thoooo!” he sneezes and falls forward, losing his balance, following his nose and thereby saving his life” (Rushdie, 41). The sneeze adds a sense of humour to the brutal attack, distracting the reader from the massacre itself.

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Midnight’s Children, opens the novel by explaining that he was born at midnight on 15th August, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. He thinks that his timed birth ties him to the fate of his country and he later discovers that all children born in India between 12 AM and 1 AM on 15th August, 1947, are gifted with special powers. Saleem thus attempts to use these powers to convene the Midnight Childrens Conference. He acts as a telepathic conduit, bringing hundreds of geographically disparate children into contact while also attempting to discover the meaning of their gifts.

The incorporation of the elements of magical powers or events to the reality not only gives beauty and meaning to Midnight’s Children but can be seen as a device binding Indian culture of the past to the contemporary multicultural interface. Whereas narrative technique of magic realism is appropriate to portray the postcolonial life in this novel.

Post-Colonial narrative and elements in Midnight’s Children

Midnight’s Children serves as an allegory for events in India both before and after the independence of India, which took place at midnight on 15 August 1947. In the temporal sense, Midnight’s Children is post-colonial as the main narrative occurs after India becomes independent, thus after the colonial period. Midnight’s Children’s is classified as a postcolonial text and it arises from the novel’s ability to interweave three main axes of the story: the real history, the recreated history based on perceptions, the recreation of a nation and the individual’s identity. The novel combines these themes and at the same time introduces the problems of postcolonial identity. According to Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern technique of magic realism is linked to post colonialism because they both deal with the oppressive force of colonial. With the usage of magic realism narrative and devices the postcolonial writers can challenge the reality and the realistic narrative, thus making possible for the creation and presentation of an alternative reality.

The value of the world that blends fantasy with reality, the truth and the
fictitious with the images which emerge from what they read or listen to lies in the fact that nothing is certain. What is real or unreal is often uncertain not only to the reader but also to the narrator himself. The reality has so many facets as to blur reality borders itself. The language of fantasy is not emblematic and it does not place borders or clear cuts between facts, stories, perceptions or reality; instead it fabricates the present, revives the past and foreshadows the future. What is fact and reality is not important. At times the language becomes metaphorical:

“Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been playing this same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes... forever” (10).

But as the narrator observes, “Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real” and sometimes magic realism shows the truth more faithfully, “Anima is a drift in a sea that consists of wave’s of excitement” and “hollow of fear” (112).

Midnight’s Children as a postcolonial text is seen in the twofold model of colonizer vs. colonized. Protagonists in postcolonial texts are often found to be fighting with the questions of identity, facing the conflict while living between two worlds and two different cultures. Postcolonial writings occur in the process of re-writing and re-reading the past and constructing a new paradigm of a decolonized identity. Thus, the novel remains a continuous and delicate investigation of the relations between reality and fantasy where the narrator Saleem constantly relates his life to that of his country, even his birth, growth, development and destruction are related to that, “I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time” (9). This connection not only is a metaphor of Saleem’s life as a representative of India, but also provides an alternative history to the one written by the colonizers.

The other characters seem to wander through the pages of history, bumping into with important development in India apparently by accident. Jackson points out, “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture that has been silenced, made invisible, covered over or made “absent””. So through his novel, Rushdie traces and uncover the true identity of India.

**Conclusions**

At the surface level, Midnight’s Children is the story of Saleem Sinai and the other children of India’s historic midnight of August 15, 1947. At a deeper level, this book is the story of arising nation which has just gained independence and trying to come into its own. The narrator implies that there is an essential
relation between the private destiny of an individual and the public destiny. Thus Rushdie’s topic is identity, both national and personal. He tries to confine a cultural identity by using literary techniques such as fragmentation, plurality and magical realism to rebuild the post-colonial India.

Midnight’s Children is a typical example of a postcolonial novel that integrates magic realism into it. By connecting and combining historical events, mythological stories and fictional narratives, it creates a true picture of Indian postcolonialism and India’s colonial past.
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