

# SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*: AN ACCOUNT OF RETRACING HISTORICAL EVENTS FOR AUTHENTICITY

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## ABSTRACT

*History is the collection of the events of the past that is recorded and preserved for the understanding of ancient times. Understanding the history is necessary to understand the present but not all the history is recorded objectively. History at all times may not be the mere collection of facts it may be sometimes what historians write. Thus the authenticity of the history has to be examined. Salman Rushdie in his famous novel Midnight's children has made an attempt to record the events of the history through the experience of his protagonist Saleem Sinai. Salman Rushdie is an Indian born British novelist and essayist popular for his historical fiction most of it set in Indian subcontinent. With the blend of magical realism and self-reflexive style Salman Rushdie published Midnight's Children in 1981 that fetched him Booker Prize and was deemed to be "the best novel of all winners". The novel deals with the journey of India from British colonialism to independence and the partition of India. This paper analyses the authenticity of the history by retracing the events recorded by Salman Rushdie in his novel Midnight's Children.*

**Key Words:** History, Events, self-reflexivity, Authenticity

## Introduction

History is the collection of the series of events through which we gain knowledge of the past. Through newspapers, books, letters and artefacts historians convey the degree of the events to the ones who haven't witnessed it. These accounts of events are documented so as to be used by anyone to study the particular event of the past, the person, the society, the culture or the rise or fall of a nation. Thus these documented events are used for referring and understanding the practices of the past and if it is studied and adapted to the existing situation, it has the ability to alter the present. When history is significant enough to change the present, is it reliable and authentic for adaptation is the question. Is history a careful, thorough documentation of the past or is history what historians write is the problem that has to be analysed. Here comes the necessity to examine authenticity of history. Salman Rushdie published Midnight's Children in 1981 with the blend of magical realism and self-reflexive style. This book

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fetches him Booker Prize award and was deemed to be "the best novel of all winners". The novel deals with the journey of India from British colonialism to independence and the partition of India. Vanisree and Charyulu states that

The novel is an allegory of modern India and a family saga presented against a historical and political background. It covers the major issues of political events of modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and also an attack on the rulers of three countries. The incidents actually happened in the life of Rushdie are reflected in the novel like that of the perforated sheet. (Vanisree & Charyulu, 435)

The glorious presentation of the freedom in the historiography is imitated by the presentation of the birth of the protagonist Saleem at the exact hour of the Independence. This event is parodied by staging the tragedies of his life in the years to come which parallels with the tragedies faced by India after Independence. This attempt of parodying was made possible with the alter perspective of the author. In *Midnight's Children* Saleem says,

"Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947- but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness," (MC 269).

He adds, "Understand what I'm saying: during the first hour of August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947- between midnight and one a.m. – no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. (MC 271).

If the writer has allowed the events to follow the conventions, then the novel would have described the experiences of independence in India like an account of historiography. But the author wishes to create an alter history and thus he focuses on the lives of one thousand and one children who were born at the same time of Saleem's birth. Saleem who is the voice of Rushdie says,

"One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth." (MC 644).

Virginia Woolf in her essay says, "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact." Thus Rushdie tells the hidden truth, the historiography would have recorded the glorious freedom that Indians received but it has failed to record the one thousand and one lives that were killed in the riot at the times of independence.

Jallianwalabagh is a public garden of Amritsar, Punjab. The garden is walled on all sides with five entrances. Saleem points out that there were also many non-violent protestors who gather in that place because it was the time of freedom struggle. He says there were many civilians in the garden because it was the day of celebration. The people gather to participate in the annual Baisakhi celebrations since Baisakhi is a religious and cultural festival of Punjab.

Thus, numerous pilgrims gather from outside the city and the garden is filled with people who are not aware of the martial law. Saleem says Brigadier R.E. Dyer was informed that many groups were rising against the authority of the British rule. As a result, Dyer cancels all the meetings which are planned by the public on April 13<sup>th</sup>.

But Saleem says this notice was not widely circulated and the people gathered for celebration than protest. On being informed about the gathering at Jallianwalabagh Dyer went with fifty Gurkha troops to fire at the gathering. Subsequently, with the command of Brigadier R.E. Dyer the troops surround the garden and fires at the open gates.

Saleem records the auditory effects of the incidents there in the riot by adding more terror to the event. He says, "There is a noise like teeth chattering in winter and someone falls on him. Red stuff stains his shirt. There are screams now and sobs and the strange chattering continues." (MC 41). He compares the noise of the shooting to that of teeth chattering in winter. This presents the speed at which the gun was fired. History says, Dyer has stated that 1,650 rounds had been fired, a number which is apparently derived by the counting of empty cartridge cases that were picked up by the troops but Rushdie records the impact of the massacre. The account of the death was given in accuracy, he says, "They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person." (MC 41,42). Saleem, through his narration and through giving the account of the death in the massacre presents the brutality of the incident. Shrishailya T writes:

Rushdie deals with a series of historical events before Inde-Bagh tragedy; the quit Indian Movement; the formation of Muslim League and its role in national politics leading to partition and the riots and bloodshed on the aftermath of partition, etc. After Independence he dwells upon the Five Year Plans, the re-organization of the states on linguistic basis; Chinese Aggression and Pakistan war; liberation of Bangladesh and above all the proclamation of emergency etc. One of the major events which individual as it is be national in significance is that of Jallianwalabagh massacre. The Rowlatt Act of 1919 proved to be total for the Indian Sikhs residing in the province of Punjab. The impugned Act debar the people from seeking legal redressal from a court of law. Imprisonment without trail is a repressive measure unheard of at any given time in the past. (Shrishailya T, 54)

When Rushdie through the voice of Saleem records Dyer's statement as "Dyer tells his men, 'We have done a jolly good thing.'" (MC 42), the narrator takes up a satiric tone that reveals the ruthless treatment of the British on the Indian people. The Eurocentric historiography may have recorded only the brave act of Brigadier R.E. Dyer against the revolting Indians because Dyer was seen as a hero among the people connected to the British Raj but Saleem in his rewriting of history satirically presents the cruelty of the massacre through narrating the experience of his grandfather Adam Aziz. He parodies the historiography by giving importance to the experience of Aziz on April 13<sup>th</sup> than narrating intensively about the massacre.

## LANGUAGE RIOT

Rushdie throws light onto the truth that history failed to record. What was planned to be a peaceful march ended up in riot because of the challenging statements of independence activist and other prominent leaders. Saleem says, "the language marches grew longer and noisier and finally metamorphosed into political parties, the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti ('United Maharashtra Party') which stood for the Marathi language and demanded the creation

of the Deccan state of Maharashtra, and the Maha Gujarat Parishad ('Great Gujarat Party') which marched beneath the banner of the Gujarati language and dreamed of a state to the north of Bombay city," (MC 262).

The language issue is so very sensitive that the antagonism between Gujarathi speaking people knows no bounds. (Shrishailya T, 54)

When the heads of Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and Maha Gujarat Parishad met at Kemp's Corner the slogan created fury among the M.G.P marchers and the riot broke out. History says that a public meeting was organized by the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee at the Chowpatty beach in Bombay. Thus, many well-known people like Sadashiv KanojiPatil known as S. K. Patil, a congress leader and Morarji Desai, an independence activist and the Chief Minister of Bombay made challenging statements against Maharashtra in the meeting. Consequently, Thousands of angry protesters joined at Flora Fountain with a plan to march peacefully towards the Council Hall, where the State Legislature was in session. Tear gas was used by the police to disperse the crowd, but it failed. Finally, the police fired the crowd that resulted in killing of 15 people.

The power of the words of Gandhi during the freedom struggle and his dictatorship in persuading people against British is satirised by Rushdie. In Saleem's version of history the glorious presentation of freedom struggle by the conventional history is criticised. Saleem says, "Leaflet newspaper mosque and wall are crying: Hartal!" (MC 37). This reveals Gandhi's enjoyment over the control in the national movement. Rushdie also records the reaction of the common people towards the national movement. Naseem says, "I do not understand this hartal when nobody is dead," Naseem is crying softly. 'Why will the train not run? How long are we struck for?'" (MC 37).

The conventional historiography negated to record the reaction of the common people towards the freedom struggle. For Naseem hartal is yet another day of mourning and she represents the group among the common men who were not aware of what is happening in the nation. The common men's reaction towards the Rowlatt Act is also mentioned by Rushdie in this novel. Aziz feels that it is wrong in the side of British to pass the Rowlatt Act because it suppresses the rights of the native people. But for Naseem rowlatt carries no significance. "What rowlatt?" wails Naseem. 'This is nonsense where I'm concerned!'" (MC 37). Thus, through these instances Saleem presents to the readers of how these major historical movements did not mean anything to few groups in the nation.

## **ELECTION MALPRACTICE AND INDO-CHINA WAR**

Saleem says that the All-India Congress party was badly shocked to see that the communists made huge votes and became the largest single opposition party. He also mentions that leader like Boss Patil made genuine efforts to collect votes from the people. Thus, Saleem makes an attempt to records his view on the possibilities of malpractice of the Congress party to win the election. By bringing Shiva and his gang as paid goondas he reveals what had happened behind the screen of the conventional history. Saleem says, "...and after the polls closed, were seals broken on the ballot-boxes? Did ballot-stuffing occur?" (MC 308). These questions reflect the interrogations of the common people even in today's scenario to whom the vote counting still remains a mystery and it is done without transparency.

Saleem also comments on the negligence of the congress party after the election. He says the Central Government failed to take responsibility to deal with the future of Bombay. He says, "...After the general election,

the Central Government continued to shilly-shally about the future of Bombay.” (MC 310). These are the incidents which neither mass media nor the history failed to record as it was handled by the ones in the power. Saleem speaks about the Indo-China war of 1962, the disaster of India is paralleled with the end of telepathic gift of Saleem. Saleem says, “on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1962, was done for the highest of reasons; that my parents ruined me for love.” (MC 418). The great confrontation of Indian army with the Chinese forces has begun. Saleem highlights the Indian army’s attack on Chinese at Walong.

Thus on narrating this incident he talks about the hopes that the people of India had on Nehru which was disappointed by the war on China. Saleem says that the people of India were floating in the sea of optimism to win China. This reveals the hope that the people had on Nehru’s Government. Both India and China were in good relationship and they had a long history after the colonization of the Europe. After these nations were freed from European rule they were not able to divide borders.

On the western front there is Aksai Chin in Kashmir -- Johnson line. This territory was not inhabited and strategically was not important to India. But for China this territory is the major connection between the two main western provinces - Xinjiang and Tibet. On the eastern side India’s border had been captured by India’s administration covering up Arunachal Pradesh. On the western side India could have given up Aksai Chin for China but, Nehru was too determined. Nehru was encouraged by the fact that China was in enmity with the world powers like US & USSR at that time so he thought that China could not attack India and it is not necessary for him to give away his claim over Aksai Chin. But, Nehru’s calculation failed, China wanted to teach India a lesson while still sending a powerful message to the rest of the world.

Thus, it would be fair on both the sides if India would have negotiated and given up Aksai Chin on the western end, having Arunachal Pradesh for its own on the eastern end. By doing this the war between India and China would have been prevented. On other hand this would have saved the lives of many soldiers and good relationship between China and India would have been maintained. Saleem in his version of history parallels the loss of faith on Nehru’s Government with the loss of faith on his parents. Saleem was told by his parents that he was taken to picnic but he was tricked and taken to the clinic to treat sinusitis. The operation had drained him from hearing the voices of Midnight children. Hence, Saleem says, “Drained. I have been drained.” (MC 423). As Saleem was drained from the voices of the midnight’s children the nation also lost hope on Nehru because India was draining in military forces ultimately losing in war with China.

## **COUP DE ETAT**

Linda Hutcheon the Canadian theorist says “What the narrator comes to realize is that the past "cannot be described objectively" thus every significant political event is narrated by Saleem through his memory and experience. In coup d’état of General Ayub Khan, Saleem witness the logistics of the coup as a guest in his uncle Zulfikar’s house. He says, “With the fate of the nation in my hands, I shifted condiments and cutlery, capturing empty biryani-dishes with water-glasses, stationing salt-cellars, on guard, around water-jugs.” (MC 403).

Thus, the 1958 coup of General Ayub Khan is turned into a mockery of an after-dinner exercise. In Saleem’s version of history the tension and danger which usually prevails the military campaigns is trivialized.

Severe national crisis is reduced to a game played between militants in power. This also suggests that the country is infected by the dictatorship and the fate of people is never decided by themselves. Instead, it lies in the hands of those in power. Saleem narrates the execution of the plan of the coup at the midnight of 1<sup>st</sup> November. Thus, he says, “What began, active-metaphorically, with pepperpots, ended then; not only did I overthrow a government- I also consigned a president to exile.” (MC 405). This reveals the readers that the plan that was made at the Zulfikar table is a significant attempt to overthrow a government and the president.

The conventional history has recorded Iskander Mirza arrest and exile, but Rushdie’s version of history brings the picture of the scene before the eyes of the readers. Saleem says, at the midnight Mizra was made to wake from his sleep and was arrested naked. The image of Mizra was projected negatively by the Pakistani historians and they believed him to be responsible for this political instability in the country. But, to the eyes of the eleven-year-old boy Mizra appears to be a helpless person who is captured in the middle of the night by the army and was forced to exile.

Saleem’s version of history makes the readers exclaim like Padma, Saleem says, “‘Really true?’ Padma asks. ‘You were truly there?’” (MC 405). Saleem’s narration with the attention to small details of the arrest creates question among the readers whether it is true. Padma reflects the thought of the readers who were finding it hard to believe that it has truly happened. Saleem records this question of Padma to tell the readers that they were tuned to believe that history is a collection of facts and there is no possibility of alteration in it but Saleem’s version of history challenges the conventional history by throwing lights on the hidden and neglected events in history.

The rigging of the election by Ayub Khan in 1964 was also recorded by Rushdie through Saleem. The election result was not based on the number of votes but it was based on the selfishness of the individual. Saleem says that the election took place on the day after the engagement ceremony of Nawab’s daughter. Saleem says that the two badmashes of the Combined Opposition Party were invited for the engagement and they were locked up with crossed rifles until the polls were closed. Saleem says, the two men shouted with anger: “They ranted on-death-of-democracy, autocratic-tyranny” (MC 452). The Nawab reply to them was “My friends, yesterday my daughter was betrothed to Zafar Zulfikar; soon, I hope, my other girl will wed our President’s own dear son. I think, then- what dishonour for me, what scandal on my name, if even one vote were cast in Kif against my future relative!” (MC 452). This reveals the method with which the Government was functioning. This suggests that Ayub Khan did not win the election fairly; the election result was the result of the selfishness of Nawab for his honour.

Additionally, Saleem says 1947 was a year of unbelievable chaos and shock to the Indian people, as Lord Mountbatten carved up the subcontinent in his haste to secure a position of political unresponsiveness for the British towards the awaiting civil war and hundreds of thousands of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were subjected to the most gruesome of tortures and death. Many were left with having no idea of whether their homes fell into India or Pakistan’s territory.

Saleem’s cousin Zafar becomes a lieutenant in the army; in April 1965 he is dispatched to help guard the Rann of Kutch. Rann of Kutch is a disputed territory on the border between India and Pakistan. While Zafar and his companions wait for the replacement troop, they see a ghost army descending on them. Accordingly, Saleem says when Zafar and his troops laid down their weapons out of fear they discovered that the ghost army were actually a

band of smugglers. Zafar comes to know that the smugglers were working with General Zulfikar's full permission. Zafar returns to his father's house and slits the general's throat with a curved smuggler's knife. The fictional character General Zulfikar is after the real personality Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Pakistan President. He was killed by his most trusted General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. History says, Zulfikar Bhutto's rule in Pakistan brought discontent among the people. Thus, General Zia-ul-Haq hung Zulfikar and freed people from his Government.

Saleem's version of history includes the event of smugglers sneaking into the region with Zulfikar permission suggest the possibility of support given by the people in power to the evil doers of the nation. Saleem in his version of history records the truth that was hidden by the conventional history. Thus, Saleem says, "Hidden behind the newspaper reports- DASTARDLY INDIAN INVASION REPELLED BY OUR GALLANT BOYS" (MC 468). He adds, "the truth about General Zulfikar became ghostly, uncertain thing; the paying-off of border guards became, in the papers, INNOCENT SOLDIERS MASSACRED BY INDIAN FAUJ; and who would spread the story of my uncle's vast smuggling activities?" (MC 468). Saleem says, this event eventually ended in Indo-Pakistan war. Gao writes:

Personal experiences of the characters in *Midnight's Children* are closely related to the national history of Indian and Pakistan. It is set in the context of actual historical events as with historical fiction. The protagonist symbolizes the country Indian as they were both born at the same time and the writer made this very clear in his writing. Every time there's something going on in India, his Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, volume 119 1767 nose senses it and he does not feel comfortable. He does not only experience historical events, but also takes part in it. For example, he assists his uncle General Zulfikar as he makes the revolution against the Pakistani government, which made General Ayub Khan the second President of Pakistan. There are historical events like Indo-Pakistani War of 1947, Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and Sino-Indian War in 1962. Rushdie depicted these events and made judgments through the expression of characters' opinions. For instance, Rushdie is against Sino-Indian War and thought it wasn't a good time for war because people are still suffering. (Gao, 1767-1768)

In the novel, Saleem makes Indian media work against their Pakistan counterpart in representing the India-Pakistan war. He says, "All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man." (MC 472). Saleem suggests the possibility of not so true news that was given by All-India Radio. He says, "But did it or didn't it? Was that how it happened? Or was All-India Radio – *great tank battle, huge Pak losses, 450 tanks destroyed* – telling the truth?" (473).

Thus, through these allegations Saleem puts forth that the media which is the source for providing factual information were taking sides during the war. This accusation on media is relevant to the current status where the news channels and the newspapers taking sides because majority of the media is run by political parties. Other news channels which were claiming to be giving facts actually fabricate the events with fiction to gain Television Rating Points.

After the Indo-Pakistan war there was a civil strife when the east wing of Pakistan was declared as an independent state by Mujib-ur Rahaman. Rahman led the Awami League to win the first democratic election of Pakistan in 1970. Despite gaining a majority, the League was not invited by the military rule to form a government. As civil disobedience erupted across East Pakistan, Rahman announced the Bangladeshi struggle for independence during a speech on 7 March 1971. Thus, the state was declared independent and it was named as Bangladesh on 25th March 1971. On 26 March 1971, the Pakistan Army responded to the mass protests with operation searchlight, in which Prime Minister-elect Rahman was arrested and taken to imprisonment in West Pakistan.

When Saleem return to India he lives in the ghetto with Parvati, he narrates the incident of Congress man holding the banner ABOLISH POVERTY with the Congress party symbol and gathering votes for Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Saleem says that at the election the new congress Party held more than two thirds majority in the parliament and had won a landslide victory.

Thus, India faced dark clouds, the people were not happy with the government. Saleem says, “in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roost” (MC 575). There were many groups that grew against the government, Saleem adds, “Jaya-Prakash Narayan led a coalition off students and workers against the governing Indira Congress;” (MC 575). As in Bihar there were riots in Gujarat also the trains were burnt and Morarji Desai took up fast-unto-death to bring down the corrupt Congress government.

Saleem highlights the formation of the opposition party in late 1974 by J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai. They named their party as Janata Morcha: the people’s front. The discontent of public increased and anticipated the fall of congress party. Meanwhile Saleem marries Parvati who bore Shiva’s child. Parvati converts to Islam and she takes up a new name, Laylah. Saleem’s version of history gives the picture of the labour struggle of Parvati that coincides with the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s struggle to defend her from her act in election.

Saleem denotes that as the history-books, newspapers and radio-programs tells that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty for the malpractice during the election campaign of 1971. Saleem parallels it with Parvati’s labour pain by saying, “what has never previously been revealed is that it was at precisely two p.m. that Parvati-the-witch (now Laylah Sinai) became sure she had entered labour. (MC 582). Saleem says Parvati’s labour lasted for thirteen days that involves Prime minister’s refusal to resign till the declaration of Emergency. On the first day with the shrieks of Parvati Saleem says, “I don’t know what’s going to come out of her, but it isn’t going to be good...” (MC 583). This suggests Saleem’s opinion and the people’s opinion in general about the result of Prime Minister’s act over her defence on malpractice on election campaign.

Through the description of Parvati’s labour, Saleem describes the violence in India. Saleem says, “while all over India policemen were arresting people, all opposition leaders except members of the pro-Moscow Communists, and also school teacher’s lawyers, poets, news-paper men trade-unionists, in fact anyone who had ever made the mistake of sneezing during the Madam’s speeches,” (MC 585). This attempt satirically reveals the violence on common people and the dominance of the Government over innocent people. Saleem says that when the baby was finally out to the world, the ‘Emergency’ was declared. He says, “when the three contortionists had washed the baby and wrapped it in an old sari and brought it out for its father to see, at exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time,” (MC 585). Saleem’s version of history attacks the Emergency Act



passed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi during the period of 1975 to 1977. According to him the act was passed by the Prime Minister to bring the democracy of the nation to pause. Thus, he feels that this eventually resulted in political crisis in India's history after Independence.

Saleem says after declaring 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 famous phrase "India is Indira and Indira is India" (MC 587) represents a call of singularity. The traumatic experience of Emergency only unnerves Saleem. He feels disillusioned with post-colonial politics altogether and loses his connection with history and politics. The violation of human rights arouses fury among people leaving it to create traumatic psychological impact. Hence, through the depiction of Saleem's version of history Rushdie points out the cruelty and the disaster of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's rule which the history failed to record. Dwivedi records:

Talking of history as being another constructive source of nation, one cannot but agree that history does provide with a sense of belonging to the denizens of a nation. To imagine a nation without history, would be to imagine history without wars. James Joyce says, with flawless precision, that 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' Bankim Chandra Chatterjee stated long time back: "We must have history", and found its resonance in Partha Chatterjee's statement, who stated that "the materials of Hindu nationalist rhetoric current in postcolonial India were fashioned from the very birth of nationalist historiography."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the fact cannot be denied that the same history has mostly been fabricated to please the mighty. (Dwivedi, 501)

From Jallianwalabagh till Emergency Rushdie portrays the other side of the history through Saleem's experience. As Napoleon Bonaparte says "History is a set of lies agreed upon" the conventional historiography has comfortably hidden the dark side of traumas and massacres but presented only the glorious account of the independence and post-independence era. It has also neglected to record the outcomes of selfishness of the ones in the power. Rushdie in the name of alter perspectives retraces history and gives the actual account of the events.

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