



## **Transaction between Fact and Fiction in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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### **Abstract**

In the domain of literary criticism, 'transaction' suggests a mutually reciprocating relation between the reader and literary text. Louise Michelle Rosenblatt in her work "The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work" argues that the act of reading is dynamic and involves interaction between the active reader and the text. This paper aims to foreground Salman Rushdie's attempts to frame a fact-fiction interface in his novel *Midnight's Children*. Discourse naturalizes conventions through iterative performance and creates water-tight normative structures. Such discursive frameworks demarcate the boundaries within which we are supposed to negotiate meaning. Contesting such truth claims, Rushdie enterprises a creative re-writing of history which questions the boundaries of history and fiction.

### **Keywords**

transaction, historiographic metafiction, postmodern, chutnification, fictionalised history

## I

In the field of commerce and finance, “transaction” refers to an agreement, negotiation, communication or exchange between the buyer and the seller. However, the concept of transaction has transcended boundaries of disciplines with interesting results. In the domain of literary criticism, “transaction” suggests a mutually reciprocating relation between the reader and the literary text. American author Annie Dillard’s oft-quoted statement-“The mind fits the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks” (qtd. in Probst) -elucidates the concept of transaction or exchange in which the reader and the text is congruent to the river and the bank, the point of comparison being the mutually defining or shaping characteristic.

Professor Louise Michelle Rosenblatt in her work *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work* argues that the act of reading is dynamic and involves interaction between the active reader and the text. A contributor to the theory of Reader Response, Rosenblatt in her work *Literature as Exploration* views the act of responding by the reader as an “event.” She writes:

The special meaning and more particularly the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* 30-31)

As each individual reader generates his/her subjective meaning from the text; Rosenblatt’s ‘transactional theory,’ therefore, interrogates the New Critics’ assumption of treating the text as ‘autotelic.’ Emphasizing the subjective role of a reader in extracting meaning, Rosenblatt conceptualizes: “. . . reading [is an] act [or] event involving a particular individual and a particular text, happening at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular social and cultural setting, and as part of the ongoing life of the individual and the group” (Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*).

## II

Discourse naturalizes conventions through iterative performance and creates water-tight normative structures. Such discursive frameworks demarcate the boundaries within which we are supposed to negotiate meaning. The time-honoured dichotomy between history and fiction supposes that history is real and objective while fiction is a fabrication by the self. Contesting such truth claims, Salman Rushdie in his novel *Midnight's Children* enterprises a creative re-writing of history which consciously smudges the boundaries of history and fiction.

The very process of recording or narrating or representing history is implicated in the operation of power. Hence one has to be sensitive and cautious to the questions of who represents history, at whose behest, by whose funding and for what purpose as human subjectivity is fundamentally culture-specific and governed by ideology. Customarily, History has been legitimized as an unbiased corpus of knowledge maintaining objective detachment from any sort of subjective prejudices. However, History being a human construct; recent debates interrogate the very neutrality of the authority of historical sources and documents.

Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in her path-breaking work “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History” argues that historiographic metafiction, a postmodern concept, lays emphasis on reformulation and parody of history as it is not a sacrosanct totality. She considered history and fiction to be inextricably interdependent. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction maps those novels which are self-reflexive yet bear cognizance to the past events. She exemplifies *in extenso*:

The postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the “world” and literature.

In the postmodern novel the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied.

And the double (literary/historical) nature of this intertextual parody is one of the major means by which this paradoxical (and defining) nature of postmodernism is textually inscribed.

In the visual arts too, the works of Shusaku Arakawa, Larry Rivers, Tom Wesselman, and others have brought about, through parodic intertextuality (both aesthetic and historical), a real skewing of any “romantic” notions of subjectivity and creativity.

As in historiographic metafiction, these other art forms parodically cite the intertexts of both the “world” and art and, in so doing, contest the boundaries that many would unquestioningly use to separate the two. (“Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History” 4-7)

Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* is deemed as a historiographic metafiction because his oeuvre investigates the transaction between fact and fiction, public and private, nation and individual. Rushdie’s re-presentation of history facilitates newer avenues in quest of identities to ascend out of culturally marginalised orbit. Being the hinge of the narrative, history literally conjoins the neonate Saleem with the polity of an embryonic nation.

### III

Writing history as autobiography is a strategy. It links the individual quotient of society with the collective consciousness of history. Saleem Sinai is the narrator and, as Asutosh Banerjee in his critical work “Narrative Technique in *Midnight’s Children*” describes, Saleem is “Rushdie’s fictionalized alter ego.” He is situated at the centre of a vast web of postcolonial Indian history. Coincidentally, his moment of birth is identical to the moment of the birth of India as a nation. Hence he asserts, “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 3)

Four major aspects of Rushdie’s use of history that deserves attention are the symbiotic blending of autobiography and narrative, the conspicuous contravene of chronology, the quest for identity and meaning of life and curious mix of facts and fantasy

(qtd. in Mitra 177). The very opening paragraph ascertains Rushdie's interplay of history, autobiography and fantasy: "I was born in the city of Bombay . . . once upon a time . . . on August 15, 1947 . . . at the precise instance of India's arrival at independence." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 3) The expression "India's arrival at independence" suggests the play of history; "I was born in the city of Bombay" relates autobiography and "once upon a time" typically hints fantasy.

The two keywords are 'Midnight' and 'Children.' Midnight refers to the fateful hour when India earned her independence, and children refers to those 1001 children who heralded the new dawn of India's independence and were born on the first hour of August 15, 1947 with a special miraculous power. Saleem was born with the power of telepathy, Shiva with the power of war and Parvati with the magic of witch. These children along with the other midnight's children formed the Midnight Children's Conference (MCC) to establish a sense of connection. Baby Saleem bags the coveted *Times of India* prize for his momentous birth. He also receives a congratulation letter from the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who assured the neonate: "We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 167) To be one of midnight's children is not necessarily a blessing, it can be even tragic. Like the ambiguous snake-ladder game in which every ladder one climbs, a snake is waiting just round the corner and vice versa; in the life of the midnight's children also for every up there is a down and vice versa. The number 1001 is a palindrome, which means it can be read both backward and forward. In this way, the number 1001 represents the reversal of Saleem and Siva's fortunes. Saleem was switched at birth with Shiva. In reality, Saleem was born of the unholy union between William Methwold and Vanita, wife of Wee Willie Winky, and Shiva was the son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai. But the nurse, Mary Pereira switches the nametags of both the babies, thereby giving the poor boy a rich life and the rich baby a life of poverty. This master stroke of fortune may make one assume that Saleem is blessed with luck. But at the end of the novel, we can see that once Jawaharlal Nehru wrote Saleem a letter and welcomed him into the world, but during the Emergency of 1975, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, bears the responsibility for snapping his miraculous power of smell and telepathy by conducting the sterilizing project because in the multiplicity and diversity of their powers the midnight's children pose a threat to the single-ruler state of Indira Gandhi.

## IV

Prof. Subir Dhar in his critical essay “Postmodernism and *Midnight’s Children*” describes the novel as a “paradigmatic postmodern text” as he refers to Meenakshi Mukherjee’s assessment of the novel as “the quintessential fictional embodiment of the postmodern celebration of de-centering and hybridity.” (qtd. in Dhar, “Postmodernism and *Midnight’s Children*” 271) For the postmodernist, fragmentation is an exhilarating phenomenon, symptomatic of escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. Saleem is an embodiment of fragmented identity, migrancy-cultural heterogeneity and hybridity. He rewords the whole of Indian history experimentally in his pursuit for individual identity. With himself at its centre, he depicts association between national events and his personal life, liquefying fact into fantasy, counterfeiting connections in order to bestow meaning on chaos:

Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages in a wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything-to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*)

However, he is adamant on the primacy of the story. His view seems to conform to Lawrence’s advice: “Trust the tale, not the teller.” (“Quote by D.H. Lawrence”)

The twentieth century Indian history is the pivot round which the novel revolves—Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919), Quit India Movement (1942), Cabinet Mission (1946), Muslim League and its role, Independence (1947), riots and bloodshed after the independence, reorganization of Indian States and language riots (1950), Five Year plans (1951 onwards), Indo-Chinese war (1962), the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal Mosque, Nehru’s Death (1964), Indo-Pak war (1965), Birth of Bangladesh (1971), the imposition of Emergency and other vested historical events, till 1975.

Such facts have been specified to us by several novelists and historians. Unlike them, Rushdie “makes Indian history a co-ordinate in his fictional art,” says Reena Mitra in her essay “History as a Mode of Literature: A Study of *Midnight’s Children*.” (Mitra 175) She opines that Rushdie is not meticulous in observance of chronology. After having given the date of his birth, Saleem somersaults to his thirty-first birthday. He then dives deep into the past of 1915’s Kashmir only to return to the present, and then to embark upon the future. This striking breach in chronology reveals the author’s intention of projecting the basic historical truth as synchronizing with the life of the individual. Global and local politics seem to reverberate in the lives of the characters all through the novel. Aadam sees Naseem’s face through the perforated sheet and falls in love on the very day in which World War I ends. Both the events herald a transition. Saleem’s parents buy one of the houses of William Methwold’s estate. This transfer corresponds to Great Britain’s transferring of sovereign power to the independent governments of India and Pakistan. As Saleem’s mother flirts with Nadir Khan, who has turned into a Communist; India finds itself flirting with Communism as well. The Pioneer Café is the hangout for the Communist party and the recruiting spot for film extras. The communists, like the film extras are in the hunt for a role to play in the nation’s political drama. India’s defeat in the China war drains the country of its optimism just as Saleem’s sinus operation drains him of the power of telepathy.

Through the pickle metaphor, Rushdie seems to advocate that history marinated through the imagination of a creative artist becomes a kind of fiction. Indeed what Rushdie provides us is a “chutnification of history” with the premeditated aim to destabilize the discourse of western historiography, as vindicated by his own statement presented in his article “Outside the Whale”: “The various films and T.V. shows and books . . . propagate notions about history which must be quarrelled with, as loudly and as embarrassingly as possible” (Rushdie, “Outside the Whale”).

The postmodern art is not self-sufficient. It consciously exists in relation to the other texts. In his famous essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes by decreeing the demise of the author privileges the text as a space for play of several voices and the reader as a space where these multiple voices gain the force. Barthes’s argument, however, may be dated back to T.S. Eliot, who pleads the extinction of the empirical author. He claims that poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. However, the decentralization of the authoritative Author began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Symbolist

poets like Stephane Mallarme and Paul Valery, who endeavoured to replace man with language (qtd. in Nayar). Kriesteva's concept of the three-dimensional textual space with the writer, the reader, and exterior texts is analogous to Rossenblatt's "transactional theory," which amplifies the indispensability of both the reader and the text in making of meaning. She writes in her book *Literature as Exploration*: "A novel or a poem or a play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (Rossenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* 24). This incredulity towards an authoritative sacrosanct historical discourse and inclusion of intertextual elements is strewn throughout Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. For instance, Saleem cites a verse from the Quoran: "Recite, in the name of the Lord, thy creator, who created Man from the clots of blood." There is a reference to Scheherazade, the heroine of Arabian Nights, and Ramayana while referring to Ravana in the chapter "Many-headed monster."

## V

History, the bloodstream of a society or the case-studies of civilizations, is legitimized as a self-contained body of knowledge. On the other hand, fiction is stereotyped as an outcome of fertile imagination divorced from reality and facts. This transaction or comingling between fact and fiction is the cornerstone of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, Rushdie has ingeniously reaffirmed his competence time and again to historify myth and fictionalize history. Prof. Nandini Bhattacharya in her critical essay "The Bizarre and Fantastic in *Midnight's Children*," traces the origin of the bizaree transformations to the Menippean tradition to which Rushdie belongs. One of the attention-grabbing features of the novel is the preponderance of fantastic and mythical creatures co-existing with human self and historical facts. For instance, Saleem is transformed into a she-dog *Cutia* suggesting 'Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence' to sniff out enemies with his nose. It drives home the point that Rushdie's truth is unlike that of the historians: "Sometimes Legends make reality and become more useful than the facts" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 200), says Saleem to underscore the environment of fictional reality.

Admittedly, Rushdie's treatment of history conforms to his idea of "illusory fictional reality," (qtd. in Shah 107) thereby hinting towards a cult of pluralism. Challenging official histories of nation's past is a strategy of Rushdie's postcolonial project and a postmodern



‘art-attack’ against the grand narrative. To sum up, Rushdie’s transaction between fact and fiction is aptly encapsulated in the argument of Nancy E. Batty, who points out:

This duality is precisely the problem which *Midnight's Children* confronts, but the novel is neither a political treatise nor a fantastical tale: it is an act of sedition, committed not just against the state, but against a prescribed conception of literature. Rushdie's implication—that if history is composed of fictions, then fiction can be composed of history—is perhaps the most potent message of *Midnight's Children*. (Batty, *The Art of Suspense: Rushdie's 1001 (Mid-) Nights* 64)

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