

Problem of Identity in Salman Rushdie's Novel *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

Salman Rushdie is one of the prominent Writer of Indian English Fiction whose remarkable contribution to literature covers the areas of religion, society, culture, politics, history. Quest of identity is also emphasized in his novels. The present paper is aimed to find out the identity of the parentage of the protagonist of the novel *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai. Here Saleem Sinai is the symbol of mix- hybrid culture.

Keywords: Midnight's Children, culture, parentage, plurality

Introduction:

The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory defines literature as pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays, and poems (in contrast to technical books and newspapers, magazines, etc.) (Oxford University Press) Literature is an art that uses language as a means to shape an image to reflect social life and express the author's thoughts and feelings. Literature first appeared as oral literature. It is generally associated to music as lyrical poetry. Modern literature usually divides literature into four categories: poetry, fiction, prose, and drama.

The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory defines culture as "A set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions shared by a group of people with at least one point of common identity." (Oxford University Press) Culture is a social phenomenon. It is the product of long-term creation of the society. It is a historical phenomenon also. It accumulates the social history. Culture refers to the history, geography, customs, conventions, traditions, fashions, literature and art, behavioral norms, laws, modes of thinking, ethics, and values of a country or a nation.

In the words of Abidi Hussain, “Culture is a sense of ultimate value possessed by a particular society as expressed in its collective institutions, by its individual members in their depositions, feelings, attitudes and manners as well as in significant forms which they give to material objects”. In the context of multiculturalism, one’s attitude towards other social systems, habits, custom is very important. Literature and culture are not independent. They are interdependent. Literature reflects the life of a person, his knowledge, beliefs, values, ethics, and his way of life. A literary writer presents the contemporary social, cultural changes that take place in his country and in the world. The impact of diversity in the present society stressing the need for understanding and coexistence is depicted in the works of cross-border writings.

The name without whose contribution the Indian English Fiction would not be complete is Salman Rushdie. Salman Rushdie is an Anglo-Indian novelist who has made a great contribution to the Postcolonial English literature. He has made use of fantasy, mythology, religion, oral tradition, and magic realism. He has his own style of narrative technique. He has reinterpreted the history, religion, politics and myth in his major novels. The novelist has given great contribution to the Literature in English.

Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* evokes multiple number of feelings at multiple levels. Human nature has a prodigious resilience. Any imbalance leads to a sense of despair, desolation and frustration. A sense of uncertainty and futility prevails. The thirst for a life giving sap prompts the postmodernist novelists to make a gigantic attempt at depicting the reigning anarchy of the contemporary socio-political scenario in pictures grotesque and incorrigible. The narration in such contexts runs in a surrealist vein to sustain the grip on the audience.

Multiple and Uncertain Parentage

A problem of the parentage is observed in the context of the narrator of the novel i.e. Saleem Senai. His parentage is ambiguous, multiple and uncertain. He represents the plural identities of India. Here the author himself relates his autobiographical elements with protagonist as he himself is a migrant, from plural background where there is no place for the pure culture. In the view of biological way, Saleem is actually the son of an Englishman and a poor Hindu

woman. It is an illicit union between an Englishman William Methwold and a poor Hindu Woman Vanita. William Methwold had taken the due advantage of Vanita and seduced her by sending her husband Wee Willie Winkie out.

... And here's the point: yes, it is guilt, because our Winkie may be clever and funny but he's not clever enough, and now it's time to reveal the first secret of the centre-parting of William Methwold, because it has dripped down to stain his face..... Mr Methwold invited Winkie and his Vanita to sing for him, privately, in what is now my parents' main reception room; and after a while he said, 'Look here, Wee Willie, do me a favour, man: I need this prescription filling, terrible headaches, take it to Kemp's Corner and get the chemist to give you the pills'..... and then Vanita was alone with the centre-parting, feeling it exert a pull on her fingers that was impossible to resist..... (Rushdie 137)

Then Saleem Sinai was brought up by a Kashmiri Muslim couple Ahmed Sinai and Mumtaz (Amina Sinai). They were ignorant of the fact that their son was exchanged at time of birth with their own s Vanita's, the poor Hindu woman. It represents the multifaceted origins of the nation. Through the complex ancestral history of Saleem Sinai, the novel reveals the different social classes, cultural patterns, and religious backgrounds in India.

....And when she was alone-two babies in her hands-two lives in her power-she did it for Joseph, her own private revolutionary act, thinking He will certainly love me for this, as she changed name-tags on the two huge infants, giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accordions and poverty... (Rushdie 157)

Saleem is Muslim if Ahmed and Amina are his parents. He is Hindu if Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita are considered as his parents. He is Anglo-Indian if Methwold is his father. Schaapsteker believes himself a father to Saleem as he saves Saleem from the effects of poison.

Amina Sinai's, dream that she was bearing the pregnancy by Nadir Khan, gives a name to the index of his paternal figures. Saleem's uncle Hanif and aunt Pia act as his surrogate parents. They played this role of parantage for the period when Saleem's parents discover that he is not their biological offspring. As he rightly states:

.....For my uncle, as well as my histrionic aunt, I acted out (with growing polish) the part of the surrogate son..... I ministered to his needs as a good son should, emptying ashtrays, sharpening pencils, bringing water to drink; while he, who after his fabulist beginnings had remembered that he was his father's son and dedicated himself against everything which smacked of the unreal, scribbled out his ill-fated screenplay... (Rushdie 338)

Uncle Hanif and aunt Pia had taken his care as his own parents and tried to give him all the things that are needed to the son. Saleem considers Zulfikar as a father figure when he was in Pakistan.

Methwold, Wee Willie Winkie, Schaapsteker, Nadir Khan, Hanif, Ahmed Sinai, Picture Singh are the father figures of Saleem. With these name he may be identified as a British-Christain, a Hindu, a snake charmer, a muslim, a adopted child etc. These multiple layers of identities are observed in the life of Saleem Sinai. Saleem is not able to fix his identity throughout the novel and hence remain always alienated. As the narrator is handcuffed to the nation's history, he represents the newly got independent country like India through him.

Plurality is also found in terms of Saleem's ability to interact with the other children of midnight. He can telepathically communicate with all of the other children. He witnesses India's complex diversity and heterogeneity with the help of these midnight children. His origins and identity are doubtful right from the beginning of the novel. This goes to continue throughout the novel as he goes through an amnesiac phase forgetting even his name, and being reduced to a man-dog, while in Pakistan. He is disintegrating and cracking at the time of writing his own life

story. This fragmentation is a used for the loss of identity. Saleem has to deal with a mottled history, a decentred country, uncertain parentage, and fragmentation of his very being. He is literally the epitome an unstable identity. For him, he is not who he thinks he is, his parents are not his parents, and to bring the irony full circle, even his son is not his son.

Conclusion:

A set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions shared by a group of people with at least one point of common identity i.e. culture is essential for us in the life. Culture plays very important role in giving us the identity. We receive the cultural heritage from our ancestors. But here in the novel *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist Saleem Sinai is unable to fix his ancestral roots as his father figures varies. It brings a empty hole in his life. For him, he is not who he thinks he is, his parents are not his parents, and to bring the irony full circle, even his son is not his son.

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