Magical Realism As A Postcolonial Device In Salman Rushdie’s Novel Midnight’s Children

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the term Magical realism and how magical realism is used as a post-colonial device in his novel Midnight’s Children. The first part of the paper analyzes the term Magical realism and the latter part of the paper deals with the problems of post-colonialism such as the difficulty of finding true history and Identity of self as well as of the nation.

The Term Magical Realism

Realism was an artistic movement started in the 19th century which rejects the romanticization of life in art and advocated the exact representation of reality. Just as realism was a response to romanticism, magical realism was a response to realism that started in the 20th century. A German art historian, photographer, and critic Franz Roh coined the term “Magischer Realismus” (magical realism) in the early 20th century to define the work of German artists. The themes of the work of these artists were often imaginary, somewhat fantastic, and possess certain dream-like quality but their subject matter always remains in the realm of the real world. Roh identified many traits of magical realism but it examines the technical aspects of painting so it cannot be used to explain the literary aspect of magical realism.

Later the term Magical realism is being introduced in literary circles and came to be associated with certain kinds of fiction. During a stay in Paris, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier was influenced by magical realism and later he becomes a chief exponent of this technique. Furthermore, he inspired many young Latin American writers. The term gained its prominence in the 1960s during the period of “Boom” in Latin American literature and then evolved as a literary movement in literature. The Columbian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez pioneered this kind of fiction and many Latin American writers inspired writers around the world. Some of the paradigmatic magical realist text is Alejo Carpentier’s The Kingdom of the World (1949), Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), Isabel Allende’s The House of the Spirits (1982), Toni Morrison Beloved (1987).

According to the dictionary of literary terms and literary theory some of the characteristic features of this kind of fiction are:

“the maligning and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or the bizarre, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narrative and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic descriptions arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific or the inexplicable.”

So, magical realism is a narrative technique that is characterized by a fusion of mystical elements into the realistic atmosphere in order to access a deeper understanding of reality. It is the blend of elements of the marvelous, the supernatural, and the extraordinary with elements

of literary realism. These magical elements are explained like normal occurrences that are presented in a straightforward manner which allows the “real” and the “fantastic” to be accepted in the same stream of thought.

A critic Angel Flores saw magical realism as a transformation from the ordinary into the unreal occurring as a part of the real with time existing in a temporary fluidity. According to his words, magical realism is;

“The amalgamation of realism and fantasy”

The fantasy is defined as “a departure from consensual reality” so naturally the mystical elements in the realistic features cannot be contextualized but the coexistence of mystical and realistic elements. Thus the two natures oppose each other but when put together it forms an unusual genre

In short magical realism is a powerful narrative that provides an opportunity to unfold truth in a different way. It allows the postcolonial writers to challenge the realistic narrative and put out another possible alternate reality.

Magical Realism in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children

Salman Rushdie is an Indian diaspora writer and essayist. His second novel Midnight’s Children was first published in 1981. The novel belongs to the genre ‘Historiographic metafiction’ and deals with the theme of identity and nation. Rushdie in his novel employs magical realism as a narrative technique to problematize the concept of history and nation. In an attempt to blur the distinctive line between historical fact and fiction Rushdie challenges the authenticity of the past and destabilizes colonial version of India. As a Diaspora writer, he is deeply concerned with the notion of history and nation. It is to note that Rushdie never said that historical facts are false; he rather interrogates how history and nation are perceived as a singular body.

Rushdie has been known as one of the greatest Magical realists ever and he purposely uses this narrative technique as a means of finding truth in his work. He himself describes magical realism as an alternative way of approaching the truth. For him, magical realism is a tool that helps him to questions the nature of reality and helps his reader to experience a different view of reality. History only has the accounts of the life of individuals who are influential people and not about the common man. Rushdie has made an attempt to present history through the Autobiography of a common man. Further, the novel is about India’s struggle for Independence from colonialism and shows how the history of India revolves around Saleem Sinai, the main protagonist, and narrator of the novel. The narrator recounts his family history purely out of his memory to the Padma and his readers. While reciting the personal history of his grandparents he weaves Indian history into his narrative. Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles to construct his own identity and simultaneously he reconstructs the post-colonial history of India.

Saleem arrives at the world “on the stroke of midnight” the exact time when India declared its independence. The birth of Saleem and the birth of new India as a nation coincidently took place at the same time and he becomes the living embodiment of the country. The two births; one of Saleem’s another of the nation is the main assumption and the rest of the story follows

the progression. According to professor Goonetilleke;

“On the simple level, the story is about Saleem Sinai and at a deep level, the story of his country where Saleem’s is important individual ha representative of the country’s independence and a literary mechanism” in the novel.

Somehow it seems that Saleem and India have an allegorical as well as literal connection. Moreover, Saleem himself tells that;

“I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.”

At the beginning of the novel, the passage starts with “One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1925” the narrator describes an incident where his grandfather Aziz Ahmed broke his nose. While praying he hit his nose on hard ground, as a result of this; three drops of blood fall from his nose and turned into rubies. At that point, his grandfather also found out that the tears which roll out from his eyes solidify like diamonds. Rushdie here used the element of magical realism. His magical realism originates in the psychology of his characters, in their conflicts, moments of uncertainty, and in the unreliable narrator’s art of storytelling.

Another particular example of magical realism is in the character of Tai. He accorded the central place in the narrative. Tai is an old boatman who carries goods and people across the lakes of Kashmir. He is the personification of old pre-colonial India and a time and space where colonialism did not reach and nor did any other western influences. Tai claims himself to be so old that he watched

“The mountains being born” and “the Emperors die.”

He further claims that he saw

“Isa, that Christ, when he came into Kashmir”

Tai has a fixed identity that is broadly eastern and he has a great love for storytelling. Furthermore, Mian Abdulla the pro-Indian Muslim politician has a strange habit of Humming without any interruption. In one strange incident, his pitch was so high that it shattered the glass “Windows of a room”.

In order to narrate his story, Saleem uses magical realism and blends it with history mythology realism, and mysticism. This technique gives him an effective way to narrate his story and demonstrate his position as a post-colonial Indian citizen. The major themes of the novel are identity and nationality, truth and storytelling, and colonialism and post-colonialism. These themes have come up with the help of this hybrid technique and without magical realism, it would be difficult to link these themes with one another. These issues are post-colonial issues. Rushdie used Magical realism as a device to solve these post-colonial issues as people will create their own identity, history their own customs, and traditions and share them with the rest of the world.

India is a diverse country and is related to the concept of hybridity, multiplicity, and plurality and it is impossible to define the Indian subcontinent as homogeneous. India is defined through its

diversity because people of India belong to different cast class religions and possess different cultures. This further pluralizes the identity of a nation. Rushdie in his essay the Imaginary Homelands: Essay and criticism1981-1991says;

“My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity pluralism, hybridity” “to my mind the defining image of India is the crowd and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, and many things at once.”

In the novel the Midnight Children’s Conference is the model of pluralism, the cultural-political and religious differences of a diverse nation, and the proof of the eventual power of diversity and is a deep-rooted part of Indian culture as rich and poor, Hindu and Muslim, boys and girl and even gender-fluid children are part of the conference. Apart from that, Midnight Children’s Conference is also symbolic of the issues India faced in its early statehood. People are from different backgrounds which exemplify all classes and races of India. Their stories and experiences are all an important part of Indian history because they along with their experiences are unique to themselves. Multiplicity and plurality are one of the dominant themes in the novel Midnight’s Children. In Saleem’s word;

“There are many versions of India as Indians”

Saleem along with other thousand children born at the midnight hour was gifted some magical powers which enable them to communicate with each other and discover the meaning of their gifts. These kids have supernatural powers and their different abilities represent India’s post-Independence generation and their powers are symbolic of the powers this generation has. It has been said in the novel that those who are born close to midnight possess more powerful gifts than others. “Shiva of the knees” and “Parvati the witch” are the two children with such notable gifts. Saleem has the power of telepathy and later in the novel has an acute sense of smell. His telepathic power allows him to connect with other children of midnight and he then forms a Midnight’s Children Conference. Saleem's telepathic powers demonstrate how magical realism allows the diverse Indians to communicate the thoughts feelings emotions desires and dreams of a nation. Hence the novel gives voice to the voiceless subcontinent.

Besides that, Saleem has multiple identities owing to his multiple parentages. He was the illegitimate son of Lord William Methwold and Vinita a poor Indian street entertainer’s wife. He and Shiva were born at the same precise time but the nurse at the hospital switches these two infants for the sake of “her own private revolutionary act” in order to find his true Identity he exploring his mixed identity through the technique of magical realism. Hybridity plays a very significant role in the novel as a great number of character who belongs to different cast class culture or religion. Saleem is a perfect example of a hybrid man born with multiple allegiance and identities. His attempt to reconcile with his multiple identities symbolically represents India’s struggle to reconcile with its plurality. After the colonization in order to break from the colonial supersession, India need to be united and form a great nation that values its diversity.

Conclusion

In Rushdie's novel, magical realism becomes the framework of the novel where the characters communicate their personal perspectives and share their own accurate version of history. With the help of magical realism, Rushdie is able to explore the post-colonial issues more thoroughly

and made an attempt to solve these problems with the help of hybridity. Moreover, the novel is a story of post-colonial India and Saleem is the microcosm of the independent nation. Saleem's personal events are runs parallel with the national events through the magical realist technique. While the colonizers categorize India as a monolithic place and Indians as monolithic people, the novel in great detail explores India's diversity and multiplicity in order to subvert the colonial Image of India. Rushdie with the help of magical realism speaks the unspeakable. To sum up, it can be rightly said that Midnight's Children broadly describe interpreting and analyze the post-colonial issues with the help of the Magical realism technique.

Work Cited

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