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# Interplay of Fantasy and Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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**Abstract**—Fantasy and realism are the traits to be found in every culture and individual. Fantasy was often dismissed for being a thing associated with children. This was a practice found to be rampant in the past or it was rather a matter of the past so to say. After centuries of oblivion, people have started giving importance to fantasy when there is a lot of chaos in the society. Fantasy as a genre that helps us to band together, explain, change and form an opinion on reality. Fantasy can surely tempt the human desire, for more than the familiar world of the readers, into ease, anyway from reality and communicate with immense imagination that the readers can connect to. With this in mind, the paper tries to analyze Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* the bizarre and the fantastic blurs the boundaries between the real and plausible in the novel, thereby problematizing the identities of gender, parenthood, and nationality, and renders the readers into a state of uncertainty by incorporating oblique references or links. It also aims to critically analyze and discuss how the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred in literature. The importance of this study is to connect the fine line of fantasy with reality in literature and to present perceptions to the readers on how literature is understood differently by different people.

**Index Terms**—fantasy, realism, myth, history, Salman Rushdie

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a genre Fantasy is difficult to define. Scholars have been discussing its definitions for years. The term has been a matter of regular critical speculation, there is no settlement on a unique definition (Clute & Grant, 1997). That is pretty understandable: fantasy has accelerated through current times and continues to be evolving, the place sub-genres are created and move each other. Boyer et al. (1979) trusts that “fantasy, as a literary genre, is composed of works in which non-rational phenomena play a tremendous part” (p.3). This implies that the events, in some cases, places and beings, could not have happened or could not exist in accordance with our truth and does no longer apply to our natural laws. Fantasy is a genre that one locates under one massive umbrella referred to as non-realistic literature, the different being practical literature.

In realistic literature, the world is just like the one we stay in, according to our natural laws. The world's past and current are an actual copy of our reality. What we read in realistic literature ought to have been real; it would no longer conflict with our view of reality. Broadly (2015) described as “the faithful representation of reality”, realism in literature is the attempt to represent difficult matters truthfully, besides artificiality and heading off artistic conventions, implausible, individual and supernatural elements. The non-realistic literature on the other hand, has a separate view of reality; something we know can't or will now not happen.

Fantasy is generally characterized by a departure from the accepted guidelines by which men and women understand the world around them; it represents that which is not possible and does not go with the parameters of our recognized reality. Fantasy usually describes those tales that would not happen in actual life, regarded as make-believe. Modern fantasy provides a break with reality like the possibility of flying vehicles from other worlds. For this to succeed, the author desires to suspend the readers' disbelief of the plot and characters. These tales involve magic, or a quest, or precise vs. evil. One of the most apparent advantages of fantasy is that it approves that the world can be seen in different lenses with the use of imagination. It takes a hypothetical situation and invites readers to make connections between his imaginary state of affairs and their personal social reality.

The understanding of truth is relative and not the same for all, as each literary realist works and their criticism reflects on this idea. One of the essential conceptual adjustments that the modernists introduced was once the perception that truth is relative, that is, that it can't be fully knowable or communicable, but can only be approached from a relative viewpoint and is no longer same to all. This constituted a colossal departure from the dominant perception of reality as

conceivable, knowable, verifiable and communicable. Realism is the trustworthy or true representation of reality. It is representative of any daily life situation generally involving middle and lower classes (most people are not regarded as the “upper class”).

The important referent of literary realism is ostensibly, reality. Fantasy fiction, for instance, maybe a kind of deformation of reality that creates its very own reality, whereas literary realism seems to be a representation of something concrete, something “real”, that is reality. On the surface, literary realism would seem to presume upon a set of guidelines supposedly associated with real-life, to reality, outside of fiction. We have a tendency to evaluate, as readers, a literary text as if it had been “real life”. A common understanding of realism is that it is marked by ‘maximum verisimilitude’ (Jakobson, 1971, p. 38). This viewpoint is frequently also thinking of as a key attribute of the genre of literary realism.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Literary realism is fiction, however, no matter what referent it should recommend. Iser (1971) opines that “the basic and deceptive assumption is that fiction is an antonym of reality. It is a source of confusion... when one seeks to define the “reality” of literature” (p.85). Reality is both its staple and its outcome. The interaction with a textual analysis amounts to a “real journey and has the plausible of making the reader react to his personal ‘reality’, so that this same fact may additionally then be reshaped” (Iser, 1971, p.85). To put it in a different way, fiction draws on, imitates and inscribes reality, irrespective of genre, and nourished by virtue of its subject and in supplying expertise in itself, has the potential of fixing our understanding of reality.

Fantasy too can open up many one of a kind chances and writers are in a position to deliver complex ideas on a symbolic degree that would be difficult to convey otherwise. Besides that, fantasy works grant a fresh perspective on the real world. The myth genre entails a distinct way of apprehending existence but it is no much less true than realism. Fairy stories and different tales of fantasy frequently get a horrific rap.

There was a time when the West was undergoing a tremendous crisis as to what should be the nature of reality to present the things around. With this fractured consciousness, it was believed that the present crisis cannot be adequately dealt with or delve in without the active engagement of fantasy because even the so-called reality was put under scrutiny. So, there was an acute need for an alternative medium that could address the issue in a very legitimate way. This sort of epistemological break has to do with the western school of thought when every available thought was put under thorough scrutiny. This, in a way, gave birth to the ‘make-belief’ world where reality was not given that much importance.

*Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines ‘Fantasy’ as “the faculty or activity of imagining improbable or impossible things. It is a genre of imaginative fiction involving magic and adventure.” There are various ways that fantasy writers build their worlds. Some novels begin and end in a fantasy world, for instance, *The Hobbit*. Others start in the real world and move into a fantasy world like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan*. Another type of fantasy is set in the real world but elements of magic intrude upon it as in *Mary Poppins* or David Almond’s *Skellig*. In a fantasy, realistic settings are often called primary worlds while fantasy settings are referred to as secondary worlds. On the other hand, Fantasy is traditionally associated with dreaming, with the working of the unconscious mind, the mind is not fully controlled in itself or its materials, a body of writing which is suitably characterized by the term ‘indulgent’. In it, there appears to be no compulsion for the writer to go by the empirical observation as a testimony of his work in order to judge the nature of reality. What is noticeable, humanly plausible, tends to be absent. Unlike realist fiction, it lacks structure, form, coherence, and order. Now, the question arises how can we justify fantasy? Magic realists have employed fantastic elements at a grand level in their works so as to give it a new flavor. All the more it can be said this was done when the so-called reality which was supposed to constitute the framework of a novel was put to question.

The writer is indulgent when he fails to respect the contingency of the real world when he does not relate his art and imagination to reality when he fails to pay due heed to the nature of our experience. He lets his imagination take flight, and ends by committing himself only to excess and extravagance. In fantasy, there appears to be no compulsion for the writer to relate his work to empirical observation, to what we may know or guess about the nature of reality. What is observable, plausible, tends to be absent. Fantasy takes the art out of ‘art and imagination’.

Realism has become then a kind of assertion of faith on the part of writer and critic, and fantasy has become associated with defeatism, abdication of responsibility, untruth, moral pessimism, and it exhibits a distinct lack of faith. We emerge with the notion that the novel has a fundamental commitment to reality, this commitment itself becoming a moral obligation for the novelist, so that he is, as it were, obliged to be a moralist in order that the critic may be a moral man.

Ian Watt (1957) in his book *The Rise of the Novel* proclaimed that “the correspondence between a literary work and the reality it imitates” (p.6) is an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary forms. There has been a lot of criticism poured on it to validate this claim made by Watt. If we pay kin attention to the bunch of writings available on the theory of fiction, we can see many critics insist on the importance of reality. Frank Kermode (2000) is one such critic who in his book *The Sense of an Ending* places more emphasis or gives more importance on reality by saying that “The novelist accepts need, the difficulty of relating one’s fictions to what one knows about the nature of reality, as his done” (p.133). He is of the view that novel as literary form “operates as a structure of reality, which must

be present in fiction in the form of contingency, and without an unshakeable respect for this contingency the writer will sink into fantasy” (Salter, 1972, p. 285). And this very structure is supposed to be guided by reality or else it will sleep into some kind of bizarre or hyperreal position. In *Language of Fiction* David Lodge, too, talked of the relation between reality and fiction. He further adds that we cannot ignore the fact that novel as a genre is rooted in the convention of realism, and the novelist is seen as a structure of reality or the one who shapes the reality to which we all have access.

### III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Realism and Fantasy are the two traits replete with every culture and society (which we find almost in every culture and society). The latter genre is said to create a make-believe world by a way individuals perceive the around them and it engages elements which are at times inexplicable through the known parameters of reality. On the other hand, fantasy describes those stories that could not happen in real life, also known as make-believe. It is available in various genres like Fairy Tale, Epic Fantasy, Heroic Fantasy, Comic Fantasy, Magic Fantasy and Modern Fantasy. It is basically a narrative that talks about a setting which is not realistic in nature, and it sets in the medieval universe, and often opens with mythical or supernatural elements which becomes the prominent elements of the plot, theme or setting.

In order to understand this complexity of realism and fantasy, it becomes necessary to read Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which is a direct source of inspiration for Rushdie himself. In one of his interviews, he confesses to having inspired by Marquez.

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. (Rushdie, 1983, p.3)

And thus opens Rushdie’s magnum opus with a fantastical tone in the city of Bombay where the narrator-protagonist takes birth at the stroke of midnight hours. The phrase ‘once upon a time’ anticipates fantasy. For over thirty-odd years, the novel has earned admiration from the reader, influencing contemporary writers, artists, and inspiring adaptations to the stage and screen. The element of fantasy is seen as a facet in the novel. Allegorically it also points to the fact that this very year both the narrator and the country he belongs to gets free from the clutches of the British. And the other is the birth of the narrator-protagonist at the same hour. The course of the novel narrates the parallel story of both.

Rushdie does mentions that it is going to be a tale “of so many stories --- intertwined live events” --- and of “--- so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane” (Rushdie, 1983, p. 4). This makes it obvious that the author is keen on clubbing the improbable and the mundane thereby hinting at things that might appear to be fanciful and fictitious. Rushdie resorts to fuse these two extremes and “opposing ends of the fictional spectrum into another kind of symbiosis” (Dhar, 1985, p. 17). One does not fail to comprehend the oscillating nature of the narrative between fact and fantasy which makes the text a fascinating read. One does not fail to observe that the author is freeing himself from the complex plot of a well-structured novel. The novelist shows his keen interest in history by adding up to something and give a new dimension to the narrative. He appropriates history in his narrative by calling on his memory which holds the utmost importance so far the complexity of the text is concerned.

The narrator Saleem reminds the reader with the fact that it is a story about:

a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream ... India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 50)

In this incredible land, where everything is possible, monsters, wdayans, djinns abound here and the distinction between the real and the dream world is persistently blurred, forcing the reader into a position of perpetual uncertainty.

Saleem’s adroitness is felt everywhere. Though he promises to tell everything but most part of it remains wrapped in the ‘filmy curtain of ambiguities’. Memory being illusory is a known fact to him. He fumbles sometimes but his rudimentary details amuse the readers. This amusing state does not last for a long time as it is punctured when he explains the role of memory:

Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorified, and vilified also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 292)

It may well be noted that Saleem inherited a fragmented style of narration from his grandfather who has the habit of seeing things bit by bit. His grandfather being a trained medical practitioner was once invited to treat a young girl, but he was not allowed to examine the girl fully, instead the girl’s female attendants held a sheet with a small hole in it. And the doctor was supposed to examine the patient through the hole. This is how his grandfather gains partial access to the girl’s body. The whole episode covertly indicates the fragmentary image of India that Adam Sinai has been carrying in his imagination. So, the hole in the sheet performs the role of a mediator between the patient and the doctor. The word ‘hole’ has been used symbolically on several occasions to clear out in the novel present situation which demands multiple interpretations.

He often employs memory as a medium of forming alternate history that debunks the mainstream history as being untrue and artificial. His social critique continues as he also presents how the appearance and reality differed in a

nation's own account of it,

Divorce between news and reality: newspapers quoted foreign economists – PAKISTAN A MODEL FOR EMERGING NATIONS – while peasants (unreported) cursed the so-called 'green revolution', claiming most of the newly- drilled water-wells had been useless, poisoned, and in the wrong places anyway; while editorials praised the probity of the nation's leadership, rumors, thick as flies, mentioned Swiss bank accounts and the new American motor-cars of the President's son. The Karachi *Dawn* spoke of another dawn - GOOD INDO-PAK RELATIONS JUST AROUND THE CORNER?" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 464)

The narrator wishes to maintain maximum truthfulness to pen down his accounts. At the same time, he is also aware of the complexities that he might encounter: "I must describe, as nearly as possible in spite of this curtain of ambiguities, what actually happened..." (Rushdie, 1983, p. 113)

One cannot miss the reference to Padma's response to the Reverend Mother's ability to enter into her daughter's mind. So, the Reverend Mother has now access to the mind of her daughter where she visits "Emerald's dreams, and found another dream within them-Major Zulfikar private fantasy of owing a large modern house with bath beside his bed" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 69). This very act is utter incredulous seemingly not possible to happen in reality, but it is made possible by creating a make-belief world where everything is possible. Padma lends her ear to the whole episode passively without offering any comment as if she is not bothered about the credibility of the matter.

Later when he mentions "the fog of guilt" hanging around his mother's head, he is certain that "Padma would believe it, Padma would know what I mean" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 218). We need a Padma like interlocutor to make the fantastic look real. Mary Pereira and Padma are made to believe that Half snake – half-man Dr. Schaapsteker is another fantastical character who said to have possessed power of being immune to snake bites. It is also believed that he was the "child of an unnatural union between a woman and a cobra" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 188) which is again something that cannot be performed in reality. These events are no less than improbable or superstitious in nature. One could dismiss these for being a preposterous matter.

The most incredulous fact in the narrative is when Saleem is bestowed with the magical power to communicate with his fellow midnight's children on account of being born on the day India got independence from the British Raj. This magical power brought him in close contact with Shiva, Parvati and other children of midnight who are also equipped with the same power and they are having forums in Saleem's head. Often, they fight over what to do with their magical gifts and Saleem can let them in or out. Similarly, in *Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha possesses the gift to become anything people want him to. He is an actor who can imitate voices and who once starred in a radio playing all the thirty-six parts without anybody recognizing it was one person. Upon his arrival in England, he not only changed his name to make it sound like English but his look as well.

The prophecy made by Ramram Seth that Amina Sinai is going to have "a child with two heads" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 461) leaves her panic-stricken. Such a strange prophecy makes her clueless, and it even takes a heavy toll on her health. Many of the prophecies that Mary Pereira does mention are about the fortune tellers prophesy about "the birth of a two-headed son" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 241), sadhus awaiting the arrival of "the Blessed One" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 241), little girls speaking in "the languages of birds and cats" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 461). These small events are testimony of the fact that the narrative has fantastical elements in abundance. Things that are impossible or improbable are being referred to in a number of places in the narrative.

We come across a serious issue when a Prime Minister is found seeking the help of astrologers in drafting the country's first Five Year Plan or when a young woman with a consciously secular bringing gives in to the prophecy of a Raman Seth with the cobrawallah, monkeyman, bone-setter surrounding him. Instead of hesitation, one finds a belief in the supernatural that cuts across class, caste and gender lines. As Saleem puts it, even a "literate person in this India of ours" is not "immune from the type of information I am in the process of unveiling" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 273).

In the novel, the author employs the technique of magic realism to present their story before his readers. It quintessentially implies reality to be fantastical than to be real, so magical reality. The birth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai whose birth coincides with that of India is given a mythical shape as the two born at the stroke of midnight on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, so his life is supposed to be magical. This event places him in such a position that he is even being addressed by none other than the first prime minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru to congratulate him on his birth,

Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: 'Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.' (Rushdie, 1983, p. 167)

Rushdie does talk about Indian politics and history through fictionalizing it, and this he does by performing a historian as well as a novelist at the same time.

But that was nine years later... meanwhile, early in 1957, election campaigns had begun: the Jan Sangh was campaigning for rest homes for aged sacred cows; in Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad was promising that Communism would give everyone food and jobs; in Madras, the Anna-D.M.K. party of C.N. Annadurai fanned the flames of regionalism; the Congress fought back with reforms such as the Hindu Succession Act, which gave Hindu women equal rights of inheritance... in short, everybody was busy pleading his own cause; I, however, found myself tongue-tied in the face of Evie Burns, and approached Sonny Ibrahim to ask him to

plead on my behalf. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 256)

He neatly weaves the national history to the personal narrative which does revolve around the protagonist.

Rushdie's comingling of history and fiction problematizes the narrative to such level to make it difficult for the readers to make a distinction between what is real and unreal. He plants Shiva to play a part in the General Elections of 1957 without taking names of the party. He does critics Indian political system as being corrupted,

One member of the Midnight Children's conference played a minor role in the elections. Winkie's supposed son Shiva was recruited by- well, perhaps I will not name the party, but only one party had really large sums to spend- and on polling day, he and his gang, who called themselves Cowboys, were to be seen standing outside a polling station in the north of the city, some holding long stout sticks, others juggling with stones, still others picking their teeth with knives, all of them encouraging the electorate to use its vote with wisdom and care...and after the polls closed, were seals broken on ballot-boxes? Did ballot-stuffing occur? At any rate, when the votes were counted, it was discovered that Qasim the Red had narrowly failed to win the seat; and my rival's paymasters were well pleased. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 308)

Thus, we see how Rushdie is not taking the name of any political party directly but only hints to it and leaves it the readers to formulate their perspective. Here one can also notice on that part of Rushdie who is trying to establish an alternative political history of the 1957 elections, thus problematizing the mainstream political history. His narrative appears to be a fine document of a social and political critique of the contemporary time. The connection between Saleem and history is established through one in the text when he says,

I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of 'dualistically-combined configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively- metaphorically and passive- literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 330-331)

He employs true historical facts by using magic realism to make history appear fantasy while the narrative is oscillating between fact and fantasy. India's defeat in the Indo-China war is synonymous with his defeat as he is being projected as the familiar cry of the day 'Saleem is India, and India is Saleem'. He narrates in depth the details his own defeat in M.C.C;

On October 20<sup>th</sup>, the Indian forces were defeated- thrashed- by the Chinese at Thag La ridge. An official Peking statement announced: *In self-defence, Chinese frontier guards were compelled to strike back resolutely.* But when, the same night, the children of midnight launched a concerted assault on me, I had no defence. They attacked on a broad front and from every direction, accusing me of secrecy, prevarication, high handedness, egotism; my mind, no longer a parliament chamber, became the battleground on which they annihilated me. (Rushdie, 1983, p. 414)

Within the western concept of fantasy, the supernatural is clarified as a projection of human fears. Saleem observes that he is "not speaking allegorically; what I have fair composed and (perused out loud to dazed Padma) is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's head truth" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 278). Saleem may well be a doubter like his maker Rushdie, but this does not make him resistant to the mysterious puzzles of the marvelous. Together with Rushdie, Saleem withstands for the rural world over the urban like Marquez is affirmed to have done. The distinction lies in that where a Padma or Mary might gulp down marvelous happenings without the scarcest faltering, Saleem might require to legitimize his position through philosophical contention. But the whole thrust of Saleem's contentions into maintaining and complement the presence of other points of view on what is, which might damage common ideas of truth, "Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 278).

Unlike the initial tellers and listeners of tales like folk tale, Rushdie cannot take the marvelous with no consideration. Saleem uses a method replete with "matter of fact descriptions of the outre and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of every day" to point out a distinction in "attitudes of mind" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 303) - a method and perspective that he confesses to possess borrowed from Shiva his twin midnight's kid. Whereas he permits Padma and Jewess to participate fully within the marvelous, Saleem Rushdie remains at a distance.

In Rushdie's novel, postmodernist skepticism is rigorously counterbalanced against premodern belief through the good use of the working-class interlocutor Padma. Her credulous responses to Saleem's subtle self-consciousness provide proof of the "miracle-seeking consciousness" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 147) of the Indian lots. Although Rushdie imitates pre-modern, he doesn't stop to possess affectionateness for it. He combines the condition of fantasy - "the reader's hesitation within the presence of the supernatural" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 183) with a supernatural clarification of events as in pure marvelous. Against Saleem's pessimism is Padma's religion altogether things miraculous, like new moons, strange happenings, prophecies, strange coincidences.

The use of fantasy by magic realists as has been discovered earlier is meant to question the place of reality in literature. Rushdie's magic realist mode is, by his own admission, a method to beat the constraints of the history of the historical testimony of a young boy's unreliable memory. However, his strange comingling of the improbable and the mundane" may be seen as an effort to relinquish a glimpse into alternative aesthetics during which art doesn't get to imitate life. Oriental narratives grow out of the semi-mythical universe. Here the strange and unbelievable isn't solely the natural material of fiction however the freaky and uncanny is additionally accepted as the 'real'. Miracles and

imperialities, of the type Midnight's youngsters, abound with are accepted, at some levels, without much doubt.

However, the novel places two views side-by-side suggesting that it is impossible to translate one in terms of the opposite. This can be totally different from fantasy wherever a fragile tension is maintained between a natural and supernatural clarification of events. Rushdie's answer is to place the two views through Saleem associated Padma to uphold the supernatural as an equally valid perspective even if some won't be able to access it.

Fantasy, then, is a medium that helps us to maintain a delicate balance between the real and unreal and the tension as well. So, the dichotomy of real and unreal is not new in literature. "Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical" (Rushdie, 2010, p. 409).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Here in Rushdie's narrative the bizarre and the fantastic blurs the boundaries between the real and plausible in the novel, thereby problematizing the identities of gender, parenthood, and nationality, and renders the readers into a state of uncertainty by incorporating oblique references or links. All these are possible due to the element of fantasy that the novel formulates. The element of fantasy is impeccably penned down by Rushdie which makes the readers amusing. Now that we have moved to an age where it is very difficult for us to discern the boundary between real and unreal. Rushdie is one such writer whose works have often been appropriated in both postmodernism and postcolonialism.

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