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Changing Textual Identities in Salman Rushdie’s
Midnight’s Children

Isabela Meriša

Lecturer, PhD, “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania

Abstract

Salman Rushdie’s novel, Midnight’s Children, connects the destiny of one family, and of one character-narrator in particular, with the destiny of India, by symbolically associating Saleem Sinai’s birth with that of the new nation. The textual journey that follows plays with concepts such as: margin and centre, identity and otherness, unity and division etc. While witnessing Saleem’s changing sense of self, India is also revealed as a stage for the inter-change of multiple perspectives on the idea of nation. Thus, ‘the myth of the nation’ becomes the pretext for the display of postcolonial attitudes and fallacies, due, in part, to its focus on establishing a compact and well-defined sense of identity.

Keywords: otherness, identity, nation, narration

1. Introduction

The fact that history is the victor’s version of events is, by now, a long acknowledged reality. And in the hands of the conqueror history becomes thus a means of justifying itself and wrapping the intrusion, the occupation, the violence, and all the other negative aspects of its actions in the hide of a civilizing mission. As Leela Gandhi reminds us, Hegel used the term ‘history’ in connection with ‘civilization’, associating them both with Western Europe [1]. The result is that colonialism was to be seen, and it was often said to be an attempt to awaken the savage and less fortunate peoples around the world to the blessings of Western social organization. Thus, the division between superior and inferior, even between human and non-human.

* Isabela Meriša. Tel.: +4-0723382135; fax: +4-0236-460-476.
E-mail address:imerila@ugal.ro
In this context, Salman Rushdie’s novel, *Midnight’s Children*, comes with a deconstructive force from within the tradition of colonialist historical recordings and it shatters the preconceived ideas already in place in the mind of a colonial, or even an early postcolonial reader. In the words of Edward Said: “The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, to transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories is of particular interest in Rushdie’s work” [2].

2. Re-defining national and personal identity

This *voyage in*, as Said calls it, is taken through the pen of Saleem Sinai, the most suitable representative of the multiple cultural voices on the background of an India confronted with the colonial experience. He declares his identity to be like a receptacle full of other people’s identities that flow into him: “There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well” [3]. Using western ideologies and theories, Rushdie makes Saleem, the narrator and ‘author’ in the novel, turn tables and move the centre where some of the most recent postcolonial theorists believe it should be, that is, somewhere in between cultural identities and otherings, playing a game of mirrors in which the focalizer is also the focalized and identity is created from pieces, as a multi-cultural puzzle.

The levels on which this game takes place are various: textual, historical (basically textual as well through writing and re-writing), implying racial, gender, social, political, religious considerations. Saleem Sinai begins his story, of a person *hand-cuffed to history*, a representative of India’s destiny as a new-born nation.

“This year [1947] there was […]a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into 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; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood” [4]. There is a sense of irony in the whole paragraph and in the whole affair, so to speak. What comes to be called ‘the Indian world’ had existed long before colonization, guided by its own rules and delighting (or not) in its own variety and multiplicity on every level of its existence. In a mythical land, a ‘myth of the nation’ is born. The paradox is that the so-called independence is actually a passage to a type of organization that is not specific to it, but it was brought by the Western world. It is not a return to the previous state, which actually seems impossible. In the words of Timothy Brennan, “If European nationalism was a project of *unity* on the basis of conquest and economic expediency, insurgent or popular nationalism […] is for the most part a project of consolidation following an act of *separation* from Europe. It is a task of reclaiming community from within boundaries defined by the very power whose presence denied community” [5]

In this novel, perhaps more than in any other, Rushdie seems to address this tendency, which is the result of chance, of choice or of a combination of the two, and the examined cases are not only national, political or social, but personal as well. The experience of Aadam Aziz seems to subscribe to a similar trajectory, by choice and chance, since, after he spends a year as a student in Germany he has adopted some of the mental structures of the European West. When he returns ‘home’, he attempts to retrace his previous perception of it, “his childhood’s springs in Paradise” [6], but he is unable to do so. Just as Aadam Aziz’s decision to accept his newly created and not very well culturally-determined self is marked by blood and tears, so will be India’s decision of finding a new place for itself in a world in which it has no choice but to enter. Saleem’s narrative underlines this situation as being one of the causes for the troubles (and failure even) of new-born India of acquiring a sense of unitary and stable national self which does not seems to apply to it. The other may be the mistaken presupposition from which it starts. Saleem records a fragment from Nehru’s discourse at the moment of India’s birth: “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance… […] We end today a period of ill-fortune” [7].
It is a high level of expectations that everybody has from the new nation, which also reflects the level of responsibility that inheritors of this postcolonial state have to find a way of distancing it from its colonial past. And since most often than not, this is supposed to be done by a complete removal of any colonial influence, the operation proves to be impossible. However, in Rushdie’s novel, this is shown at the level of national history and politics only through the lens of personal history, as already mentioned.

The narrator prepares his readers (with Padma as a representative within the text) for the birth of the one, the child born on August 15th, 1947, at midnight. He wraps his narrative in almost mythical hues (he is prophesized in a manner which may recall the great religious teachers), but he also never forgets to undermine it and ‘trivialize’ it at the same time (after all, no one is a prophet in his own country). His coming is seen as the first sign of a new nation and it is recorded as such by the reporters of the Times of India and by a letter from Nehru – “we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” [8]. The irony comes from the fact that, although the child was actually switched at birth and he is the illegitimate son of an Englishman, Methwold – allegedly the descendant of an imperialistic officer – and a poor Indian woman, the truth of Nehru’s words remains, Saleem being indeed a mirror of the nation’s identity, but in a different way than expected.

The years of Saleem’s development are wrought with fear of failure. For example, when the second prophet of his coming, Purushottam, the sadhu, who had spent his time living close to the Mubarak – He who is blessed – loses his healing powers, Saleem immediately feels this to be a sign of his own failure to come up to the holy man’s expectations: “The sadhu Purushottam suddenly lost his magic. Water had worn a bald patch in his hair; the steady dripping of the years had worn him down. Was he disillusioned with his blessed child, his Mubarak? Was it my fault that his mantras lost their power?” [9] It is a haunting fear of failure that seems to mirror that of India’s young government.

When the new is actually revealed to be ‘tainted’ by the old, by the very intrusions everybody was trying to avoid, the reaction is one of acceptance on a personal as well as a national level: “when we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira [of switching the babies], we found that it made no difference! […] In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts” [10]. The next step is the attempt to re-define oneself and the nation, which Saleem does by writing, or re-writing his story and history while also discussing it with a reader-narratee, thus the inclusion of Midnight’s Children within the category of historiographic metafiction. The purpose of all this seems to belong to the same family as Bill Ashcroft’s observations: “The central strategy in transformations of colonial culture is the seizing of self-representation. Underlying all economic, political and social resistance is the struggle over representation that occurs in language, writing and other forms of cultural production. Representation can be defined as the process of giving concrete form to ideological concepts, and its importance in political projects of self-determination cannot be overestimated, because it involves the entire fabric of cultural life and the sense of identity that is inextricably woven into that fabric” [11].

It might prove interesting to notice that Saleem Sinai is not the only Rushdian character who tries to gain identity by self-narration. A similar case, for instance, is that of Solly Solanka (double ‘s’ again) in Fury, a more recent novel. Within the same metafictional area of the connection between fiction and reality, Solanka travels through different types of creative discourse in an attempt of determining the essence of his self and he has to face the textual and/or psychological otherness within before succeeding it. The term ‘textual otherness’ is connected to Solanka’s fictional nature and it refers to the types of discourse that he does not feel as his own, as defining him, but as disrupting the unity of his self.

Similarly, Sinai confronts the cultural definitions of self and other within himself, which he believes to be strongly connected to the cultural kaleidoscope that defines his country’s identity as a nation. The purpose, that he himself states in the beginning of the narrative, is that of achieving a sense of unity: “time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” [12].
The reference that is made to Scheherazade’s tales can be related to several aspects of the narrative. Firstly, since the legendary story-teller’s purpose for telling her stories was the preservation of her life and that of other possible victims of Shah Ryar, Saleem’s story may be said to acquire, by association, vital importance as well. Secondly, it points at one of the most important symbols of the story, the night, a time of dreams, fantasies, but also a time of passage, of mystery, all the things that define the coming into existence of the Indian nation and of its first offsprings. And third, it is only one of the numerous intertextual references which are meant to hint at the relative and fragmented nature of narratives in general and, since history is the narrative of a nation, at the fragmented and relative nature of history as well.

Not only the official histories and representations are being undermined and questioned by and due to Saleem’s text, but his own narrative as well – by his own doing and by the presence in the text of a narratee-reader, Padma. She seems a more traditional reader who is shocked out of her pre-conceived ideas about what proper narrative should be. Besides the moments when Saleem himself admits not to be a ‘reliable’ historiographer – “I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the 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” [13]. – there are also moments when Padma shatters his ‘reliability’ even more (when she points out, for example, that his illness, or his feelings affect his writing). For a postmodern reader, however, these are as many clues that no actual history or historiographer can be defined as objective, reliable, and impartial.

3. Conclusions

Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children proves to be, in many ways, a manifesto of the postcolonial perspective of the present, after crossing many stages of (re)evaluation and (re)definition. The result is not that of simply destroying something, in this case an ideology and a myth, but additionally of replacing it with something else, an understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of India’s cultural identity after August 15th, 1947. It may be seen as an overcoming of the moment of rebellion against the previous, colonial state of facts, and an acceptance of its inevitable influence, since “all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents” [14]. With the acceptance of this reality, there comes the need for understanding, for a re-definition which should mirror this complexity of the children of midnight and of the history that gave birth to them.

References