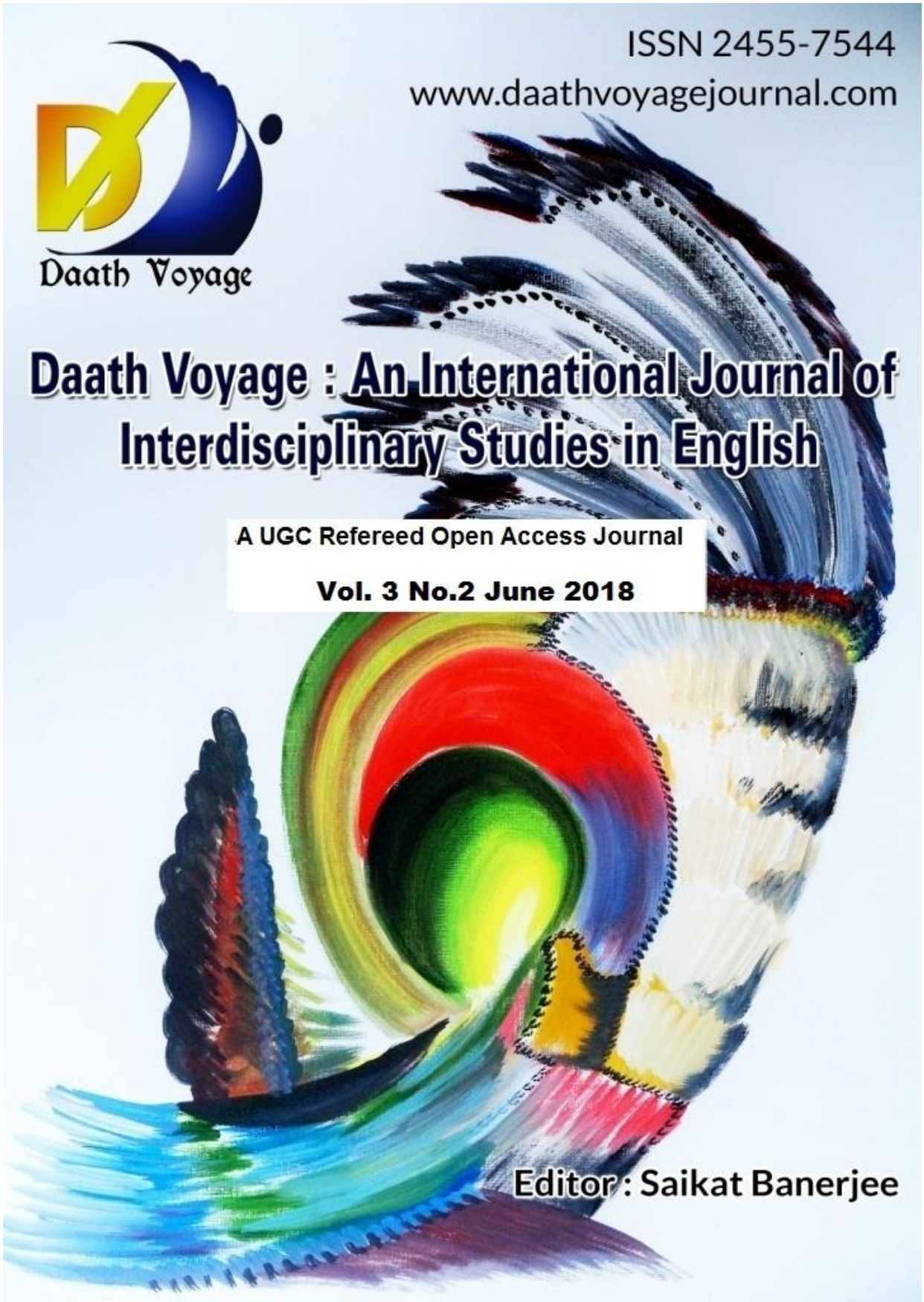

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Magic Realist Experiments in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie brought about a change and new vigour in the writing modes of Indian English novels. He experimented not only in contemporary postmodern forms and story-telling strategies like magic realism, metafiction and historiographic metafiction, but also remarkably used indigenous story-telling techniques such as oral narratives, incursion of fantastic into a supposedly realist narrative, episodic structure, digressive mode and so on. This paper is an endeavour to examine his magic realist experiments in *Midnight's Children*, which borrows from both European and Indian traditions of the category of the magical. The purpose is to examine how a supposedly historical narrative is fundamentally revelling in the magical with a view to foreground the real and historical.

Keywords: Magic realism, intercultural discourse, post-colonialism, post-modernism.

Magic realism, a coinage from German art critic Franz Roh, refers to the magical representation of reality into art. Unlike realism which purports to give an illusion that it represents the world outside "as it is" or surrealism which intends to unravel deeper inner recess of human mind—psychological and subconscious reality—magic realism blends fantastic with the real. More appropriately, it blurs the boundary between what is magic and what is real through sudden incursion of fantastic elements into an otherwise realistic plot. Defining the term, David Lodge writes that magic realism figures in when "marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative" (114). The genre today is associated with Latin-American novelists like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and some other continental writers like Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie. In the novels of these kinds, a bizarre confluence of the fantastic with real is achieved wherein ostensibly realistic characters and settings

suddenly start functioning in magical ways. Thus, magic realism can be roughly described as a narrative that simultaneously juxtaposes two contradictory modes of representation, realistic and fantastic.

Magic realism is a successful postmodern strategy of questioning the mimetic realism, that is, it critiques the possibility of any authentic representation by blurring the boundaries between the real and magical and simultaneously evolving a resistant aesthetics against the theory of verisimilitude between life and literature. Magic realism can be distinguished from other fantasy-genres like science fiction in the sense that it never attempts to move away from the real, and if it evokes magical, the purpose is to intensify the effect of the real. In other words, magic realism can be defined as a subversive realism that questions and challenges, if not altogether refutes, the claims of the faithful representation of the reality as a whole into art. It calls into question the mimetic power of words to adequately represent the world, of language as the mirror of the world, and simultaneously destabilises the nature of Truth and Reality. In brief, magic realism is a successful postmodern tactic of questioning the concept of mimetic representation. It figures as a form that merges the fantastic and real world and blurs the boundaries between them, as a means of presenting history through story. It establishes itself as a subversive realism which lays bare the contradictions involved in the logic of realism.

Furthermore, another feature of this magic realist genre is that it emerges from the confluence of two opposite thought traditions—modern empiricism that gave birth to realistic fiction and pre-modern supernaturalism (in the positive sense of metaphysicality) which works behind mythical and several such other magical tales as a shaping force. More prominently in postcolonial societies like India, it functions as an intercultural discourse building a bridge between colonial realism and pre-colonial fantastic narratives. Postcolonial authors have readily adopted this current global narrative to express two conflicting cultural codes—one of the west that mostly held reality to be empirically verifiable and immanent and the other of the east which revels in magical, supernatural or, say, transcendental. In India, magical or fantastic has always been the part of story: the stories of gods and goddesses with which our mythology is replete have innumerable such magical incidents and actions which can be now easily associated with magical or fantastic but still

majority of Indians are never shocked by their 'unreality' and consider them as real as any ordinary empirical phenomenon. Thus magic realism, in the context of postcolonial Indian English novelists, is both an indigenous story-telling strategy and culturally hybrid genre.

Midnight's Children is a historical narrative if we conform to the broader definition of a historical novel offered in *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* by Avrom Fleishman who writes that "what makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force" (15). Mostly reveling in the ideas of history and historicity, *Midnight's Children* also oddly records almost all the major events of modern Indian history—the Amritsar massacre (1919), the 'Quit India' Movement (1942), the Partition of India (1947), the language riots and the division of states (1956), the Indo-Chinese war (1962), the death of Nehru (1964), the Indo-Pak wars (1965 and 1971), and the Emergency (1975-77). But what distinguishes it from the 'proper' history is the *manner* in which it reports these events. The narrator/historiographer of this novel, Saleem Sinai is the bastard son of a departing English colonizer, Methwold and Vanita, a lower class Hindu woman but is brought up by a Muslim couple, Ahmad and Amina Sinai owing to an instinctual child-swapping act of the hospital nurse. The story is narrated retrospectively in the first person by Saleem himself who recounts the events of his life and his family saga, against the backdrop of Indian history, to Padma, his beloved and a worker in the pickle factory to which he has come after he has been emptied of history during the Emergency. At the heart of this autobiographical historification lies unique blending of the magical with the historical which tells the tale of *Midnight's Children*, of those who were born at the precise hour of India's independence and had supernatural powers by virtue of their fortuitous birth, and more prominently the story of Saleem, with magical telepathic abilities and Shiva, with phenomenal physical strengths.

In mixing the recognisably realistic with the fantastic, *Midnight's Children* is a magic realist text. To rewrite the complicated and traumatic history of recent Indian politics, Rushdie uses this narrative mode. The argument can be aptly supported by the observations of Richard Cronin who opines in this regard that "the Indian English novel cannot be written by a simple realist, but only by a writer willing to flirt with fantasy, a writer ready to dally with Bombay talkie"(186). Though

there is certainly an exaggeration in Cronin's observation yet it can never be totally refuted that the experiments in fantasy provide Rushdie with unlimited powers to penetrate the reality of Indian history inside out. Throughout the novel, Rushdie has interpolated fabulous and fantastical in the same narrative which otherwise claims to be realistic and historical, as the characters caught up in contemporary political and social turmoil also possess the magical powers owing to their fortuitous birth at midnight. All the 1,001 midnight's children have magical powers, which differed considerably according to the proximity of the moment of their birth from midnight but only 581 of them survive as a consequence of the death of 420 children by their tenth birthday. The two born exactly at the moment when clock joined hands together are endowed with most powerful magical gifts, Saleem (blessed with the powers of telepathy and an uncanny sense of smell) and Shiva (born with a pair of powerful knees and an extraordinary ability for fighting wars), the boy with whom Saleem was swapped at birth. The fantastic elements in the story borrow from magic realist techniques to reflect the political realities of the 20th century. Saleem is the most remarkable in his miraculous powers with his telepathic ability to bring people together and connect them inside his mind. In the novel, by the time Saleem reaches the age of nine, he experiences a strange magical phenomenon due to which he begins to hear voices rattling in his head, and after the washing-chest accident he becomes 'a sort of radio'. Hiding in an old clock tower, he enters the thoughts of strangers all across India, from movie stars and politicians to cab drivers and tourists. He also builds a Midnight's Children Conference inside his head which works as a kind of parliament to discuss the current conflicting ideologies of the then contemporary India which symbolically reflects the challenges the country witnessed with regards to its cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. Saleem's mind might be functioning like a catalyst, a telepathic conduit and is undoubtedly magical but what is being intended to be said is certainly real—there is hardly any doubt in conflating the split of Midnight's Children Conference on the grounds of linguistic and cultural differences with real division of Indian states on linguistic reasons. Furthermore, when Saleem loses his telepathic abilities, he regains very soon another sort of magical ability, an acute sense of smell. As I have already mentioned that the most of the events which Saleem is narrating happen in his absence, the role of these magical abilities becomes more crucial in linking the wholly different personal and

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historical happenings. Any analysis of history-fiction interface will clearly reveal the magic realist nature of Saleem's narrative which states how Saleem retrospectively connects the political history of twentieth-century India with his personal family history through his dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies. There are several episodes in which the narrative takes sudden excursions into fantastic without making any distinction from the real. For example, when, on December 15, 1971, Tiger Niazi, the Pakistani army officer in charge of the war against Bangladesh, surrenders to his Indian counterpart and old friend, Sam Manekshaw, Saleem comes across Parvati, the witch who helps Saleem escape from Pakistan by magically transporting him in her basket:

> Saleem, shrouded in wickerwork darkness, was reminded of years-ago midnights, of childhood wrestling bouts with purpose and meaning; overwhelmed by nostalgia, I still did not understand what that something was. Then Parvati whispered some other words, and inside the basket of invisibility, I, Saleem Sinai, complete with my loose anonymous garment, vanished instantly into thin air.
>
> 'Vanished? How vanished, what vanished?' Padma's head jerks up... I, shrugging, merely reiterate; Vanished, just like that. Disappeared. Dematerialized. Like a djinn: poof, like so.
>
> 'So,' Padma presses me, 'she really-truly was a witch?'
>
> Really-truly. I was in the basket, but also not in the basket; Picture Singh lifted it one-handed and tossed it into the back of the Army truck... one hundred and two persons returned, although one of them was both there and not there. Yes, magic spells can occasionally succeed. (380-81)

The passage certainly demonstrates undistinguishable mélange of fantastic and real. It simultaneously evokes historically verifiable details as well as the event that is impossible to verify. We have nothing else but to believe his disappearance cloaked in invisibility.

There are innumerable such instances of blending marvellous with the real in the narrative. Throughout the novel, the conversion of metaphors into events is another device of magic realism in the novel, for example, the 'cracks' in Saleem's body correspond to the 'crack' in the body politic of the nation and so on. Rushdie constantly exploits the metaphorical axis of substitution which convincingly substitutes one (tenor) with another (vehicle) without any verifiable connection only

on the grounds of attributive association. Metaphors used by Saleem to link personal with political aptly describe probable in terms of improbable, and most of the times, substitute events with themselves. Such convergences are the appropriate mode of the magic realist form adopted by Rushdie. It, first, pushes physical phenomenon to verge on the metaphorical plane and then questions their veracity leaving the readers baffled about the ontological nature of these magical events.

Theorising the nature of magic realism, Linda Hutcheon points out that the post-modern is related to magic realism as "post-colonial literatures (which) are also negotiating ... the same tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with the past" ("Circling the Downspout" 151). She associates the genre with the Third-World writings stating that "the formal technique of 'magic realism' (with its characteristic mixing of the fantastic and the realist) has been singled out by many critics as one of the points of the conjunction of post-modernism and post-colonialism" (152). By introducing the term magic realism in reference to *Midnight's Children* and analysing it in the light of aforementioned hypothesis of Hutcheon, it can be appropriately argued that this novel definitely marks a moment of conjunction between postmodernism and colonialism. Thematically, it is meant to negotiate the tyrannical weight of colonial history as we know that Saleem is the bastard son of a departing colonizer which, in turn, forces Saleem to obsessively view his life in terms of his nation whose birth itself, is considered a colonial legacy. Therefore, Saleem finds himself handcuffed to history and desires to liberate himself.

Whatever be the nature of magic realism in *Midnight's Children*, postcolonial or postmodern, it is inextricably grounded in the tradition of Indian mythological story-telling. It is a fact now that magic realism is one of those few novelistic forms which were born outside the western soil, which is in Latin America. But the point I intend to make here is that the form has always existed in India though without any theoretical terminologies. If we look at the nature of the stories in our epics and *Puranas*, we'll have no pains to claim that the form was never unknown to Indian story-tellers. The stories, in the epics and *Puranas*, always purported to be real, didactic but simultaneously evoked the fantastic. *Ramayan* which has been referred to in the novel also, intends to present a realistic narrative of Ram's life so as to establish him as an ideal in the society but there

are several marvellous incursions into otherwise realistic narrative such as Ahilya's re-metamorphosis into a woman from the stone, the Lord Hanuman's power to fly and his power to carry a big mountain in one hand and so on. But such fantastic actions are not at all doubted by us and we 'willingly suspend our disbelief' taking them to be real as any other real event or action of the narrative. Our mythology contains countless such tales of gods and humans who are endowed with magical abilities. Rushdie owes a lot to our/his native oral and mythological story-telling ways. The names of some of the characters in the novel correspond to our mythological goddesses. For example, Padma, a synonym of goddess Lakshmi, is the companion of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the cosmos, and, in the novel, Padma is to be married to Saleem who is also a preserver of histories. Shiva and Parvati are also invoked in the novel. Attribution of magical powers to the characters with the names from mythology cannot be considered impossible as the mere chanting of their names presents a visual of their magical abilities before the eyes of Indians. Furthermore, the magical sniffing abilities of Saleem can be equated with Lord Visnu's Varahavatar (incarnation as a pig, an animal endowed with an acute sense of smell) which is not only real but sacred also. In other words, what I want to propose is that magical abilities of the characters of the novel are not at all shocking for the Indian readers who have a rich tradition of explaining the real in terms of marvellous and vice versa. In this regard, Rushdie himself says: "Many people, especially in the west, who read *Midnight's Children*, talked about it as a fantasy novel. By and large, nobody in India talks about it as a fantasy novel; they talk about it as novel of history and politics" (quoted in *Inventing India* 187).

In conclusion, *Midnight's Children* uses magic realism as a method of re-telling 'reality' with the aid of the magical. It is culturally postcolonial but narratologically postmodern in nature. Since *Midnight's Children*, the form has established itself as a major narrative mode of Indian English Fiction in whose lines fall the novel likes *The Circle of Reason*, *Looking through Glass*, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and dozens of several well-known novels which together form the canon of Postmodernist Indian English fiction.

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