

Human Dignity, National Identity and Fragmented Self as in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, through the life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai, explores the relation between individual identity and national history. This paper argues that Rushdie presents human dignity as inseparable from cultural plurality and historical memory. Salman Rushdie uses magical realism as a political and ethical strategy in *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie fuses the supernatural with the historical narrative and thereby constructs a language, which gains dignity to marginalized subjects against colonial, nationalist and authoritarian erasure. Rushdie also discusses how colonial legacies and national authoritarianism remain as a threat to individual dignity. Human dignity and identity are regained through storytelling and collective memory.

Keywords: Human dignity, magical realism, national identity, history.

Introduction

Midnight's Children is considered as one of the most important postcolonial novels in Indian Literature. The life of Saleem Sinai who is born at the exact moment of India's

Independence is symbolically interlinked to the history of the nation. Contradictions, hopes and traumas of the postcolonial India are explored through the technique of magical realism. Human Dignity is the right of each and every human being to live with freedom, recognition and self-determination. In *Midnight's Children*, human dignity is often affected by political suppression, social divisions and historical turmoil. Yet, dignity survives through memory, storytelling and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Saleem's life cannot be separated from national history. Saleem himself says, "I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, ... I was inextricably entwined with my world" (Rushdie 330-331). Saleem's life being inseparable

from the history of the nation is universal. Individual identity cannot be separated from social and political turbulences. National and state realities affect the lives of the individuals.

Personal experiences of Saleem become metaphors of the successes and failures of the new born independent nation.

Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha illustrates that nations are constructed through narratives that continually negotiate cultural difference. Bhabha argues that national identity emerges through storytelling rather than fixed historical truths. Saleem's narrative reflects this concept in the novel. Saleem's narrative constantly redefines and reconstructs the past.

India's struggle to define itself after the colonial rule can be identified with Saleem's struggle to understand himself. Rushdie's depiction of historical identity becomes a defence of human dignity. Individuals possess the ability to interpret and narrate their experiences in their own way and thereby retain their dignity.

Fragmentation serves as a personal and national condition over the course of the narrative. Divided nation is metaphorically represented by Saleem's experiences of physical and psychological disintegration. Saleem emphasizes that "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, ..." (Rushdie 292). Political turmoil faced by the nation makes it difficult for individuals to remember coherent identities. Yet, Saleem constructs his own narrative, refusing official versions and this affirms autonomy.

People are reduced to mere instruments of state power due to political events like partition and emergency and

this threatens human dignity. Especially, the Emergency was an authoritarian attack on personal freedom. Rushdie criticizes authoritarianism and violation of human dignity. Literary critic Aijaz Ahmad argues that postcolonial literature frequently

exposes the contradictions of nationalist discourse. Similarly, Rushdie exposes that political independence does not mean or automatically ensure human dignity or freedom.

Celebration of diversity is one of the significant features of Rushdie's writings. India is known for its diversity. Through Saleem's telepathic connection to the midnight's children, Rushdie creates a metaphorical assembly symbolizing India's linguistic, religious and cultural multiplicity. Dignity lies in mutual understanding and recognition rather than uniformity. The children in the midnight's children conference possess unique abilities, backgrounds and dreams. This reflects a pluralistic society, where each person is respected for their uniqueness and can live with dignity. Rushdie's magical realism often challenges firm historical narratives. Rushdie blends history, myth and fantasy to create space for multiple perspectives.

The novel emphasizes that human dignity is acknowledgement and respect of differences rather than suppression. The narrative style becomes a means of retaining dignity. Saleem narrates his story repeatedly, inspite of errors, interruptions and uncertainties not merely as a record, but as an affirmation of existence. Saleem declares, "I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine" (Rushdie 535). The way Saleem defines himself is complex. Human beings are complex products of memory, history, culture and relationship. The political forces cannot destroy the sense of self worth built by Saleem by adopting complexity. The novel suggests that dignity depends on the ability to speak, remember and express one self. Narration becomes an act of refusal against erasure. Human dignity is presented as a powerful force in *Midnight's Children*. Struggle for human dignity survives fragmentation, political suppression and cultural discrepancies.

Saleem Sinai's narrative establishes that dignity emerges from memory, plurality and self- expression. Rushdie condemns authoritarianism and at the same time celebrates diversity. The novel also affirms that human dignity is not preserved by outside sources like political institutions but through human ability to stand against oppression.

Works Cited

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