

Re-Presentation of India in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines'

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Abstract: *India has so many stories to tell about the past, present and the future. It is true that a nation is not there if it is not part of one's own consciousness. A nation does not exist as a physical entity, but lives by and speaks to us through the culture-soul. With Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children', novelists are inspired to take up this aspect and their writings focused on the social, political, cultural issues of their country. 'Midnight's Children' is Rushdie's interpretation of a period of about 70 yrs of India's modern history dealing with the events leading to the partition and beyond. The identification between the public and private strands is complete in this novel and that gives unity to the novel. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Line's focusses on the meanings and shades of political nuances in contemporary life. The quest for political freedom, violence in modern life are aptly delineated in the novel. Thus these two novels are important political documents that draw material from history, sociology and politics.*

Keywords: Consciousness, Interpretation, Partition, Political Freedom, Post Colonialism, Nationalism, The protagonist narrator.

1. INTRODUCTION

J. Mee sees the rewriting of modern Indian history and 'the question of who constitutes the nation' as common concerns of recent Indian novels and recent Indian historiography.

The Indian writing in English has been weighed by the responsibility, in particular, of narrating the nation, re-presenting India in all its post-colonial contexts. Since rewriting of modern Indian history is the common concern of recent Indian historiography, Indian historiography and Indian novel can be seen as complementary genres and the historian and the narrator are complementary to each other. The difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that the fiction writers write about the human history. So history intersects with private life and there is no distinction between the private and public life. The trend of historiography writing began with Rushdie in his work *Midnight's Children* and writers like Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth followed him.

Rushdie remarks that "everything has had to do with politics and with the relationship of individual and history"¹. He connects "the individual component of society with the collective stream of history"².

2. TREATMENT OF HISTORY

With Rushdie, history, as arranged in time and space or with facts and figures is "abstracted, modified, enriched and made realistic through portrayal of the corresponding setting and psyche of the human world"³. Amitav Ghosh is the most cosmopolitan of contemporary Indian English writers and finds his mission as a writer, with an anthropologist's sense of detail, and a historian's grasp of facts and chronology and with a creative writer's curiosity, great narrative skill and imagination. Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' is a partition novel with links between history and literature, depicting nationalism during the period of colonialism and that of post colonialism and constituting various concepts of the post colonial theories of literature.

2.1 Midnight's Children and The Shadow Lines

Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children', has completely transformed the Indian novel in English. His narrator collects obscure items from the past and collates them together to make a sense of history. This kind of speculative reconstruction of the past through fragmentary evidence constitutes an important aspect of the post-modern novelists' narratives. In the novels created by Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh history intersects with private lives and realism blends with fantasy. The method of collapsing distinctions between the private and the public is a new trend in fiction and writers like Rushdie and Ghosh take advantage of this direction to create global fiction. Since India is constituted and represented by diverse communities, religions, beliefs and faiths, this self-generating mode of autobiography and personal narratives becomes the natural device for them for responding to the plurality and differences in the country. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* deal with this aspect focused on national history cutting across personal narratives.

2.2 A National Allegory

There is skillful blending of public events and private lives in both the novels. The individual destinies of the protagonists are shaped by history. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is read as a national allegory giving imaginative form to India and its history. Saleem, the protagonist narrator in *Midnight's Children*, identifies himself with the fate of his country. He is born at midnight on 15th August, 1947 the date on which India emerged as an independent state. He is a native alien and a hopeless and hapless victim of history. He leads a desultory life. Saleem's life is a perforated sheet and he feels a hole in the centre of his body. Saleem is a part of history, reduced this partitioned state by the India-Pakistan war of 1965. He and his family are reduced to fragments by war. Saleem, the self-conscious narrator, oscillates between the past and the present, the historical and the personal. He has no stable identity, but assumes many identities. He is a fragment, yet complete. His inner life is a function of the historical forces affecting his state.

2.3 The Character of Saleem

Saleem is highly self-conscious narrator. He is Rushdie's alter ego and an allegorical representation of India's independence and the life of Saleem is really the history of independence. He is by turns aggressive, coy, strident, fatalistic, rebellious, bawdy, flippant and grave. He is pouring a long narrative out all at one go in breathless haste in large paragraphs without any full stop. This indicates his haste and confusion. Rushdie is obliged to invest him with superhuman vision, extraordinary powers of thoughts readily in order to make his omniscient accounts of a dozen different lives as well as the life of the nation credible as coming from a single witness.

Saleem's literally 'disintegrating and fissured body' from which history pours out is an allusion to the underlying political fragmentation and fissiparous tendencies of Indian politics past and present which have continued to the making of its history. In fact, fragmentation, the bane of Indian society and politics, runs through the theme and technique of the novel. Saleem's life covers the period from independence to the lifting of the emergency, but charming spots of the bygone times are also visible through the open sesame of the perforated bed sheet. Saleem is linked to history by different modes of connection, through manifold relationships, both literal and metaphorical. He does not seem to lack an identity, it is only that multiple identities press upon him - a mirror of the fragmentation and multiplicity of Indian society and the confusion of social, religious, regional and parochial identities under which India suffer.

2.4 A Historical Tale of India

Midnight's Children burgeons with life, with exuberance and fantasy. It has the "same effect on the eyes and ears as a magnificent circus performance"□. The language is as full and copious as a flood of fire. The book's extraordinary scale and fertility, its span of styles from free buoyant fantasy to murderous social invective, its mixture of radical aesthetic experiment and political courage, its power of illuminating the English language with metaphor, myth and sheer legalities of Indian writing made it a remarkable intervention. *Midnight's Children* is hailed as an exuberant epic of India--- fantastic epic --- many voiced mixture, composition of autobiography,

family saga and authentic history, an excessive extravagant ecstatic book, colourful, intelligently staged, full of virtuosity, an eminently political novel between myth, irony, magic and with the flair of an oriental fairy tale. It shows how epic, fable, national events, family saga, advertisements, films, popular songs, news paper clippings, gossip could all be gathered up in one comprehensive sweep. It is a hybrid tale of India incorporating complex web of Hindu and Islamic motives, philosophies of 'Maya' and 'Karma' and Sufism and interweaving private/personal and public/political histories of Indian sub-continent.

2.5 Ghosh's Blend of Cultures

Ghosh follows Rushdie to a large extent in his technique and vision. But he is different from the latter in the sense that he does not see the present in the mirror of the past. But the present throws light on the past. In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh, through his narrator, brings his childhood memories back and joins the past with the present. Spanning over three decades and three countries, India, England and Bangladesh, this novel tries to build a bridge between reminiscences and experiences, private lives and historical events. Thus a minor event in Kashmir involving a theft of a relic from a mosque is inexorably linked with the upsurge of communal riots in Calcutta. In this novel the East and the West confront and face each other in a meaningful way and as the narrative moves backward and forward in time, it tends to bridge geographical and emotional space between the two cultures and to flatter time as one continuous flow of duration. In Ghosh's view, all borders - be they political, cultural, racial, linguistic, communal, spatial or even temporal are constructs and for crossing. "Perception, imagination and articulation enable one to cross all such shadow lines, to colonize other space, to find one's place in one's story". This is essentially an act of the imagination - as the young hero of the *The Shadow Lines* is taught by his hero and mentor Tridib who gives him 'worlds to travel in' and 'eyes to see them with'. A place has to be invented in one's own imagination.

2.6 Ghosh's Spiritual Quest

Travel is a spiritual quest, a quest for narrative design for personal significance in a meaningful world. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator attempts "to see through competing master narratives in order to reconstruct stories (private narratives) and histories (public narratives) through memory, imagination and listening to other people's tales"⁶. Ghosh believes that in the subcontinent private tragedy often assumes a public significance which overshadows the personal urgency of an event.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus we find that the focus of these novelists is on the post independent era. They are aware of post-independent sub-continental realities and relate man to the existential fallout of such realities. The catastrophic experiences of the partition, the 1975 emergency, 1984 anti-Sikh riots have stirred these novelist historians into critical appreciation of the politico-cultural conditions of the sub-continental men.

The different narratological perfection that these novelists put forward includes the use of imagination, fantasy, myth and metaphors. The two novels deal with the common politico-cultural indices like violence, repression, misuse of religion, intolerance, lack of freedom, faith, and passion for self perpetuation and so on.

Rushdie and Ghosh used fantasy and fiction for revisualization of facts in their novels. "They treat history for studying ontological condition of man in the context of post-modernism where every history is considered a kind of narrative like the novel"⁷. The study of select post modern novels with special reference to *Midnight's Children* of Salman Rushdie and *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh is to look at the narrative strategies of and the representation of India in the respective novels. They invited intelligent criticism and illuminating reviews and have succeeded in stirring the collective consciousness into an activity of stock taking while rethinking and redefining the roles and identities for the prospective world order.

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