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## New Historicism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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**Abstract:** *New Historicism is a school of literary theory which consolidates critical theory into easier forms of practice for academic literary theorists of the 1990s. It first developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt, and gained widespread influence in the following decade. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a fine example because only through understanding how the experience of Partition, homelands that exist in the subjective, and the idea of displacement in Rushdie's own life is the full magnitude of the novel.*

*Midnight's Children* is a loose allegory for events in India both before and, primarily, after the independence and partition of India, which took place at midnight on 15 August 1947. In the temporal sense, *Midnight's Children* is post-colonial as the main body of the narrative occurs after India becomes independent. The narrative framework of *Midnight's Children* consists of tale which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma. This self-referential narrative recalls indigenous Indian culture, particularly the similarly orally recounted *Arabian Nights*. The events in Rushdie's text also parallel the magical nature of the narratives recounted in the *Arabian Nights* (Stewart). The disparate materials pertaining to those times of political upheaval, popular upsurge, growing optimism, and chaotic developments that often bordered on the fantastic could not have been woven together by any other method but that of fantasy.

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born in Mumbai on 19th June 1947. He is a British Indian novelist and essayist. His second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), won the Booker Prize in 1981. Much of his fiction is set on the Indian subcontinent. He is said to combine magical realism with historical fiction; his work is concerned with the many connections, disruptions and migrations between East and West.

*Midnight's Children* is a 1980 book by Salman Rushdie that deals with India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. It is considered an example of postcolonial literature and magical realism. The story is told by its chief protagonist, Saleem Sinai, and is set in the context of actual historical events as with historical fiction.

New Historicism is a school of literary theory which consolidates critical theory into easier forms of practice for academic literary theorists of the 1990s. It first developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt, and gained widespread influence in the following decade. The approach of New Historicism argues that a work of literature does not exist devoid of its conditions or circumstances. In this light, literary works are as much a product of the author's mindset as well as the conditions that surround it. The historical and social context of the author is almost as important as anything else in assessing the construction of the literary work. In this light, New Historicism is based off of the contingent, stressing its role in the development of literature. This can be seen in many works.

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Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a fine example because only through understanding how the experience of Partition, homelands that exist in the subjective, and the idea of displacement in Rushdie's own life is the full magnitude of the novel. The works of Nadine Gordimer are another example of how the New Historicist approach can yield greater insight into the work. *Midnight's Children* is not at all a fast read; it actually walks the line of being unpleasantly the opposite. The prose is dense and initially frustrating in a way that seems almost deliberate, with repeated instances of the narrator rambling ahead to a point that he feels is important--but then, before revealing anything of importance, deciding that things ought to come in their proper order.

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Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born at midnight on 15th August, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. He imagines that his miraculously timed birth ties him to the fate of the country. He later discovers that all children born in India between 12 AM and 1 AM on 15th August 1947 are gifted with special powers. Saleem thus attempts to use these powers to convene the eponymous children. He acts as a telepathic conduit, bringing hundreds of geographically disparate children into contact while also attempting to discover the meaning of their gifts. In particular, those children who are born closest to the stroke of midnight possess more powerful gifts than the others. Shiva of the Knees, Saleem's evil nemesis, and Parvati, called "Parvati-the-witch," are two of these children with notable gifts and roles in Saleem's story.

Saleem has to contend with his personal trajectory. His family is active in this, as they begin a number of migrations and endure the numerous wars which plague the subcontinent. During this period he also suffers amnesia until he enters a quasi-mythological exile in the jungle of Sundarban, where he is re-endowed with his memory. In doing so, he reconnects with his childhood friends. Saleem later becomes involved with the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay's "cleansing" of the Jama Masjid slum. For a time Saleem is held as a political prisoner; these passages contain scathing criticisms of Indira Gandhi's overreach during the Emergency as well as what Rushdie seems to see as a personal lust for power bordering on godhood. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the *Midnight Children*, and there is little left for Saleem to do but pick up the few pieces of his life he may still find and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his still-young nation; a chronicle written for his son, who, like his father, is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history.

Now, nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing that his death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell his life story. Padma, his loyal and loving companion, serves as his patient, often sceptical listener.

*Midnight's Children* can also be considered as a new-historicist novel. The critics of the post-modern period apply the term 'new historicism' to interpret literary texts. The term 'new-historicism' was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt, whose book *Renaissance Self Fashioning: from more to Shakespeare* (1980) is usually regarded as its beginning. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* has given a simple definition of the term new historicism as "it is a method of the 'parallel' reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period" (172). It means that new historicism refuses to privilege the literary text; instead of a literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. Typically, a new historical essay will place the literary text within the frame of a non-literary text. Greenblatt juxtaposes the plays of the Renaissance period with 'the horrifying colonialist policies by all the major European powers of the era.'

When we say that new historicism involves the parallel study of literary and non-literary texts, the word 'parallel' encapsulates the essential difference between this and earlier approaches to literature which had made some use of historical data. These earlier approaches made a hierarchical separation between the literary text, which was the object of value, the jewel, as it were, and the historical 'background,' which was merely the setting, and by definition of lesser worth. Barry is of opinion that "the practice of giving 'equal weighting' to literary and non-literary material is the first and major difference between the new and old historicism" (174). Barry continues to write:

The appeal of new historicism is undoubtedly great, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, although it is founded upon post-structuralist thinking, it is written in a far more accessible way, for the most part avoiding post-structuralism's characteristically dense style and vocabulary. It presents its data and draws its conclusions, and if it is sometimes easy to challenge the way the data is interpreted, this is partly because the empirical foundation on which the interpretation rests is made openly available for scrutiny. Secondly, the material itself is often fascinating and is wholly distinctive in the context of literary studies. . . . Thirdly, the political edge of new historicist writing is always sharp, but at the same time it avoids the problems frequently encountered in 'straight' Marxist criticism: it seems less overtly polemical and more willing to allow the historical evidence its own voice. (177)

Regarding the break in chronology in the novel, it is clear from the very beginning that the author never had in mind a sustained biological account of the life of the hero or a record of historical events in order of time. In the novel, on the one side we have Saleem's personal life, and on the other, corresponding to this is the life of the nation

After that, every major event in Saleem's life is linked with some incident in the life of the nation. Saleem returns to India after a period of exile in Pakistan. In a fit of anger, Saleem resolves to give the nation the right to choose a better future, for he looks upon the country as "not only my twin-in-birth but also joined to me (so to speak) at the hip, so that what happened to either of us happened to us both" (Rushdie 385). At this critical moment in the life of both, Saleem and the nation, the pace of history accelerates and there are a number of synchronous events on either side. Shiva's "explosion" (Rushdie 410) into the life of Saleem at the magician's ghetto coincides with India's surprising nuclear capability demonstrated with the first nuclear explosions in the deserts of Rajasthan on 18th May 1974. The marriage celebrations of Saleem and Parvati synchronize with the Republic Day festivities in the country and from then onward the parallels drawn between the life of the protagonist and that of the nation continue through Laylah Sinai (Parvati). The moment Laylah enters labour room, Indira Gandhi is found guilty of malpractices in the previous elections. Laylah's son, Aadam Sinai is born on 25th June 1975, the very day Emergency was imposed in India. He too, like Saleem, is "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (Rushdie 420) and his fortunes are inseparably linked with those of his country. His distress caused by tuberculosis is suspected of having "something darkly metaphorical" (Rushdie 422) in it. It seems to be manifestation of his connection to history. In the words of Rushdie, ". . . in those midnight months when the age of my connection-to-history overlapped with his, our private emergency was not unconnected with the larger macrocosmic disease, under whose influence the sun had become as pallid and diseased as our son" (422). And then Saleem is arrested and imprisoned. He loses his freedom and he loses with it his silver spittoon swallowed by bulldozers to sever him from "the last object connecting me to my more tangible, historically verifiable past" (Rushdie 432).

The colonizer had encroached the colonizer's history and deprived him of his political position in that history. Rushdie through his novels has brought a revisionist attitude to history in re-positioning the postcolonial subject in the panorama of the world. He has thus proved unique in freeing the colonial subject from the colonizer's possession and domination of history and politics. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie, in fact, presents intensified images of reality as he sees it in the Indian sub-continent in the decades preceding and following India's independence. The dissimilar materials pertaining to those times of political upheaval, popular upsurge, growing optimism, and chaotic developments that often bordered on the fantastic could not have been woven together by any other method but that of fantasy. Rushdie is able to question the contents of colonial power and ideology by accepting an international medium and code, through which he can subvert the very identities of the colonizer

### References

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