

History-Fiction Nexus: A Study of Innovative Fictional Strategies in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

Dr. J. Anjana, Asst. Professor
Dept. of English, NSS College, Pandalam

The traumatic ambivalence between the political and the personal within the twentieth century Indian society sensitized Indian creative writers to undertake significant literary projects. Harrowing days of The Emergency that marked the culmination of the relentless craze for power had a tremendous impact on the contemporary Indian English fiction. It integrated with the patterns of lives of characters and functioned as the germinal nucleus fermenting human story. These novels galvanized the lethargic and slumberous Indian fictional world by blatantly repudiating existing paradigms of fictionalization and adopting unprecedented dynamics of demystification. New demystifying strategies were imperative since the conformist ones failed to express the intensely felt existential problems in the changed political scenario.

Drifting drastically from conventional methods of writing, the corpus of Indian English fiction witnessed a commendable metamorphosis in terms of its multiplicity of themes and plurality of stylistic devices. A fresh crop of writers emerged who relished innovative techniques and a more confident approach to fiction making. They reflected and refracted the concerns of a society in the throes of modernity. Ruthlessly discarding descriptive writing, they deliberately imparted complexity to the treatment of contemporary world. Theme, form and structure were subjected to rigorous experimentation. Realism yielded to fresh stylistic devices such as satire, magic realism, fantasy, metafiction, irony and many more. Language too served as an effective demystifying agent to convey the extremely sensitised reactions of these novelists.

Salman Rushdie commanded this bandwagon of exemplary literary wizards with the publication of his momentous work *Midnight's Children* in 1981. It provided the much-required bombshell that jolted Indian creative writers out of their complacency. Its stylistic innovations and exuberant use of fantasy as an expressive device stunned the tradition bound novelists in India. *Midnight's Children* was a clarion call which heralded postmodernism in Indian English writing. In the fictive interpretation of the history of India and that of the personal history of the protagonist, Rushdie employs unconventional strategies of demystification and introduced an altogether new package of fictionalization. He manoeuvred with the realistic mode of writing offering a fresh fictional experience. The judicious jumbling of events from the past, present and future makes a mockery of the unity of time giving a circular pattern to the novel. Familiar

historical events get defamiliarized by the expert hands of the author by using both linguistic and aesthetic deviations. Heresies in literary creation were kneaded thereby transforming them to become the trademarks of Indian English fiction.

Rushdie makes use of an intricate fictional design to offer a comprehensive vision of the multi-dimensional Indian society. In the oriental fashion of storytelling, he presents his novel as one told by the protagonist Saleem Sinai to his beloved Padma who functions as a chorus character or audience. The use of the first-person narrative technique enhanced the writer's expertise of fantasizing and in re-constructing reality as a pattern of relationships between events and people, and between people and people. A clear metaphorical parallel is drawn between the growing up of Saleem and the development of the newly independent nation. The protagonist is a personification of contemporary fragmented Indian reality. At a deeper level, the disintegration of Saleem is symbolic with the decay and decomposition of the post-independence India. The protagonist says "... I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (MC 1). The interplay of the personal and national histories is the most significant feature of *Midnight's Children*. As Mujeebuddin Syed records:

Saleem's account of Indian history then is an alternative history, a tale of marginalized who persevere in spite of the attempts by centres of power to sweep them under so-called "history", and as assertion of his polyglot identity as an Indian. (107)

Rushdie perfects the technique of magic realism in *Midnight's Children* which links the Indian cultural legacy to contemporary multicultural interface. The complexity of fictional fabric owes mainly to the excessive mixing of fantasy and reality. Rushdie employs magic realism to substantiate the telepathic abilities of the protagonist and the thousand and one midnight's children which enable them to communicate with each other through their minds. In order to give credibility to the omniscient accounts of the narrator, Rushdie endows him with super-human vision and extraordinary powers of thought-reading. Recurring images and metaphors have an important function in Rushdie's method and meaning. The most enduring metaphor is that of the 'perforated sheet' which makes its appearance through out the novel. The seven inch 'hole' in the bed sheet replicates the metaphorical 'hole' in the body of the protagonist. Everything slips and trickles through it. Saleem observes his life and the political history of his nation through this metaphorical seven-inch hole.

Rushdie's potpourri of demystifying techniques is crammed with myriad stratagems which he cautiously employs to augment the artistic excellence of the novel. Allegory, irony, parody, parallelism etc. assumes gargantuan stature as Rushdie dexterously delineates the contemporary Indian political history. The writer employs historical parallels as a fictional technique in the novel by unfolding meanings at a paradigmatic level. Parallels are drawn

between historical events and fictional events, connecting, and developing the significance of both. The protective armour of irony is employed by the author in his interpretation of history and has made it a point not to relegate his irony into unpalatable cynicism. Parody too is in its full bloom in *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie made astonishing experiments with language and is unparalleled in his extraordinary use of Indianized English. By subverting the 'English' English and replacing it with an Indianised English, Rushdie tries to reiterate the cultural identity of our nation. *Midnight's Children* straddles two languages, each having its own cultural baggage and literary tradition. The Indianization and indigenization of English has been done through the twin process of abrogation and appropriation of the language. The ramifications of Rushdie's technique extend far beyond the mere substitution of a lexical item from one language with another alien word. Rushdie's fictional world takes its ingredients from Indian political scenario and synthesizes them thoroughly using new artistic patterns which finally leave the readers awestruck due to its colossal magnificence.

Shashi Tharoor proved himself a worthy successor of Rushdie when he rocked the Indian academe with his modern epic *The Great Indian Novel*, by re-constructing and subverting the master narrative of the nation, *The Mahabharata*. He exhibited a common thread of creative sensitivity with Rushdie in fictionalization of contemporary India. His aesthetic package is brimming with heavy doses of fantasy, parody, metafiction, satire, humour and paradox. Tharoor skillfully demythifies *The Mahabharata* and superimposes the political history of contemporary India on its epic structure. He strips the epic off its heroic grandeur to make it an apt framework for the fictional rendering of the post- Independence political situation of India. He twists and tampers with the events and characters in the epic by a careful manipulation of various stylistic strategies. The master text with its loose structure and lack of a definite manuscript endowed the author with greater flexibility and excessive freedom in fictionalization.

Tharoor's version of the historical account begins roughly from the time when Gandhiji entered Indian politics and extend to the time Indira Gandhi returned to power after the fall of the Janata Government. The nightmarish experience of the country during the Emergency period in the history of free India reverberated the echoes of the epic battle of Kurukshetra. Tharoor's Ved Vyas, similar to his epic counterpart narrates the story to his amanuensis Ganapathi. The narrator becomes the spokesperson of the author through whom he addresses issues relating to political discourse. Almost all mythic characters are demythified by Tharoor to create a ring of contemporaneity in the ancient myth. He makes judicious editions, omissions, revisions to distribute the narrative space among characters and events. The most pertinent one is that of employing the postmodernist technique of changing genders and relegating thousand Kauravas into just one person, Priya Duryodhani. The fact that she equals the whole of Kaurava clan

suggests that she is as strong as thousand men. Krishna, who occupies a dominant role in the ancient epic is a reduced and relegated figure, a demythified form of his original grand status in Tharoor's version of the epic.

Satire is a major fictional technique that Tharoor devises to re-tell the story of the Indian political situation. He refracts the modern history of India through a satiric prism. His satirical vehicle is brimming with several forms of irreverent style, puns, word play, light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, playful stories and witty digressions. The use of satire is an added license to the author by which he could assault everyone. The satirical punch is evident right from the beginning. The narrator-protagonist opens the narration with the words:

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me, creasing their eight-hundred-rupee suits and clutching their moulded plastic briefcases, to announce in tones of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop. Stuff and nonsense, of course. (TGIN 17)

The Great Indian Novel is primarily an allegorical piece of work though the novelist does not mention it specifically inside or outside the novel. Tharoor exhibits excellent finesse in giving the allegorical garb to the characters and events by effecting subtle changes. Tharoor subjects the dominant political persons of independent India to extreme satirical treatment by giving them an allegorical garb of the mythical characters.

The novel rises to metafictional excellence in being a commentary on the art of storytelling as well as a story on its own merits. The novel itself is a testament of historiographic metafiction. The multiple narrative strands of the novel are meticulously manipulated to create a fascinating dialectic between history and fiction. The novelist uses history as a base and re-visit the past with objectivity and irony. Parody is an all-pervading feature in the case of *The Great Indian Novel* right from its very title, theme, style, treatment, and technique. The parodic and self-parodic intent embedded in the textual structure provides the novelist with the necessary distancing from his culture and tradition. It also acquits the author of the most sacrilegious and highly volatile statements. The description of the divine scribe Ganapathi is done in the same parodic vein.

So, the next day the chap appeared, the amanuensis, name of Ganapathi, South Indian, I suppose with a big nose and shrewd intelligent eyes; Through which he is staring owlshly at me as I dictate these words (TGIN 18)

Ironic tone proves effective while referring to the brutal massacre at Jallianwallah Bagh. Irony used is detached, calm and composed similar to that of Rushdie when he refers to the same incident in *Midnight's Children*. The novel is a supreme testimony to Tharoor's hegemonic

control over the King's language and diction. He has given a new dimension to the linguistic acrobatics that Rushdie has developed. Closely interweaving history into the epic narrative framework by employing innovative techniques of demystification, the novel provides a palatable account of India of the twentieth century.

Springing from identical crucible of artistic sensibility, Rushdie and Tharoor meticulously delineate the history-fiction nexus these two novels by means of avant-garde techniques since the contemporary decadence compelled them to undertake daring steps of fictionalization. The treatment of history by these novelists conjoined with unprecedented fictional techniques and varied narrative patterns, demolished old fictive traditions and established new prototypes. They devised new dynamics of demystification to contain the profligacy and debauchery prevalent in post-Independence India. Covering almost the same period of Indian history, the two novels are tools in the hands of their authors by which they can make a passionate protest against the atrocities committed during the time of the Emergency. The vigour and vitality of their fictionalization revived the Indian literary scenario, setting a new trend in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Works Cited

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. 1981. London:

Vintage, 2006.

Syed, Mujeebuddin. "Midnight's Children and its Indian Contexts".

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature

29.2 (1994): 95-108.

Tharoor, Shashi. *The Great Indian Novel*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.