

The Theme of Fragmented Identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* though a political allegory speaks much of fragmented identity of an individual called Saleem Sinai who belongs to the Muslim family of Sinai's. The story of the novel depicts the life of three generations of Sinai's family focusing on the theme of migrancy, displacement, dislocation and alienation.

Fragmented identity is the major theme in most of the Rushdian novels. It may be due to the fact that he himself faced identity crisis throughout his life. His first novel *Grimus* was published in the year 1975. The protagonist of this novel is Flapping Eagle, a young Indian who receives the gift of immortality after drinking a magic fluid and goes in search of his immortal sister. He finally finds her on a Mediterranean Island controlled by *Grimus*, a magician. Here, though the protagonist achieves immortality it does not help him much.

Rushdie's third novel *Shame*(1983) is political in nature. It is an allegory representing the political situation of Pakistan. The protagonist of the novel is Omar Khayyam. The central theme of the novel is the violence that is born out of shame.

Salman Rushdie's other novels *The Satanic Verses*, *The Jaguar Smile*(1987), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*(1989) deal with the theme of identity crisis. The theme of fragmented identity is subtle in other Rushdian novels whereas it is the prominent in his Masterpiece the *Midnight's Children*.

It will be the task of this paper to examine the way Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a novel depicts the theme of fragmented identity in it.

Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* acclaimed an international repute when it was published in 1980 and subsequently won Booker prize for fiction in 1981. His first novel *Grimus* was published in the year 1975. The protagonist of this novel is Flapping Eagle, a young Indian who receives the gift of immortality after drinking a magic fluid who goes in search of his immortal sister. He finally finds her on a Mediterranean Island controlled by *Grimus*, a magician. Here, though the protagonist achieves immortality it does not help him much.

Rushdie himself faced the identity crisis at various occasions when he became a victim of migrancy and cultural dislocations. He faced the situations of being racially discriminated at England in his early life. Saleem Sinai the protagonist and the narrator of the novel *Midnight's Children* is very much identified with the author Salman Rushdie where Rushdie admits the fact that the narrator is Saleem whereas he Salman.

Midnight's Children though a political allegory speaks much of fragmented identity of an individual called Saleem Sinai who belongs to the Muslim family of Sinai's. The story of the novel depicts the life of three generations of Sinai's family focusing on the theme of migrancy, displacement, dislocation and alienation. Fragmented identity is the major theme in the most of the novels of Salman Rushdie due to the fact that he himself faced identity crisis throughout his life.

Midnight's Children portrays the life and experiences of three generations of a Muslim Family, living in Srinagar, Amritsar, Agra, Bombay and Karachi. Saleem Sinai the central character works at a pickle factory who narrates along with his

life experiences the events like Quit India Movement, Muslim League activities, Riots, five year plans, Pakistan war to his wife Padma. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of the *Midnight's Children* who belongs to a Muslim family represents marginalised voice. His identity is fragmented that he cannot escape from the injustice happened to him at the same time he is unable to trace out his roots. Many a times he confronts with the history and roots of identity.

Saleem Sinha tries to locate his problem of identity crisis at the very beginning of the novel when he narrates:

'I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Buddha and even Piece -of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate -at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement.'(page3)

Saleem is a victim of identity crisis. Everything happens to him but he just remains passive. The perforated sheet in the first part of the novel best symbolises this crisis. It has two meanings: one is that fragment and particular as opposed to linear and universal; and another is the question of identity. The perforated sheet becomes the symbol of the fate of Sinai family. The victimisation of Saleem family begins with his grandfather Adam Aziz. Ghani the conservative and traditional Muslim land owner does not allow even a doctor to see his daughter so he prepares a perforated sheet held by four muscular women between the doctor Aziz and Nazeem, the patient. A small hole was made in the centre of the sheet and it is through that hole the doctor was allowed to see the parts of the body of Nazeem which have problems for her. However, She, because of her soft living contracted with innumerable types of minor illness and thereby enabled Aziz to see all the

parts of our body without face. He loves the parts without head. His fall is complete when at last he sees the long desired face of Nazeem. However, the fragmented perforated sheet becomes the symbol of fragmented identity in the life of both Saleem and his family. At first, quite against Aziz's will, the family did not turn to be as good as he expected. In spite of Aziz's bindings she refuses to come out of her veilssand she becomes more and more fat. There is a gulf between Aziz's liberalism and Nazeem's conservatism. Within short span of time she dominated the family and Aziz gradually lose his control in the house. Thus he becomes the first victim of identity crisis.

Saleem's father Ahmed Sinai faces a different sort of identity crisis. Here it is due to the fact that he is a minority. His business suffers at the hands of anti-social and communal elements. The Ravana Gang which called itself a group for Hindus was once communalist gradually converts itself into brilliantly conceived enterprise and begins demanding huge sums from Muslim property owners to let their world remain unburnt. Ahmed along with some other Muslim friends go to the pre decided place to pay the amount demanded. However, the monkeys snatch the money bag and send the bundles of notes lying in the ditch. Finally, he returns home to see his go down burnt down. He flees to Mumbai then. Thus like his father in law, Ahmed Sinai, he also becomes the victim of identity crisis.

However it is worse in the case of Saleem the protagonist. It has got multifariousness hue. He is actually not the real son to the Sinai's. He is the result of an illicit union between Vanitha and Methwold who seduces her. He thereby does not have father because Methwold returns to England after 1947, he even does not have his mother because Vanitha dies in her delivery bed. However, Mary, the nurse in order to win the heart of her Marxist lover the Joseph De Costa who hates the rich, changes the name tag of both Vanitha's baby and Amina's baby and thereby pushes the baby of rich to the difficulties of poverty and Saleem thus gets the privilege of her

revolutionary act to become the child of the rich. However this intensifies the identity crisis because he becomes conscious of this secret and always lives with the fear that this secret may be disclosed at any moment. He also fears about Shiva who actually is the legitimate son of Sinai's. In spite of all his precautions, the secret that he is not the biological son of the Sinai's was not concealed for a long time. Once, he tackles a fighting with his classmate and loses his finger. He was hospitalized where it is discovered that he is not the biological son to Sinai because his blood group is neither Alpha nor Omega. So, his parents abandon him. He becomes an orphan.

Saleem identifies himself with India. However his identification with the nation becomes bane rather than a boon to him. His physical appearance exactly simulates with the geography of nation with two large moon face, which was too perfectly round, something lacking in the region of chin, dark stains spreading down his western hairline, a dark patch in his ears, temples like stained horns, a large nose which can be compared with the vegetable cucumber only and legs that irretrievably bowed. These features constitutes together to create an ugly creature like Saleem, who in the course of his life moves on adding one and another to his deformities. He loses his figure when fighting with his classmate. He loses the hair on his head when his geography teacher pulls his hair hard. When he announces that he hears voices, his blasphemous announcement makes his father slap him and that causes him to become deaf in one ear. He loses his memory in the bomb blast. He becomes impotent when Shiva along with the doctors attacks him and castrates him. Thus these deformities make him the most ugly creature and complicate his identity.

Salman Rushdie's other novels *The Satanic Verses*, *The Jaguar Smile*(1987), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*(1989) deal with the theme of identity crisis. The identity crisis is subtle in other Rushdian novels whereas it is the prominent theme in his Masterpiece *the Midnight's Children*.

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