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'Time' in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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"Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible". (Rushdie, page 145)

And what is real may not be the truth. Both reality and truth are relative terms, as is Time. And what is 'Time'? One may say Time is the measurement of moments and instances which can be used to specify how much has gone by and how much is to come. It is a tool which enables us to locate in anteriority when was an action done or when is it supposed to be done in posteriority. And as we know Time is relative, a frame of reference is required to locate Time or we need Time to locate experiences. Time is a concept. And as Bhartrihari said 'Time is illusion'.

Though the form of Time is abstract it is rendered objective and concrete by the action in the narrative. According to Paul Ricoeur, every narrative text has two Times: the narrative's signifier time (the time it takes the reader to read the text) and the signified time (the time taken up by the events of the narrative). Rushdie has fiddled with this signified time extensively in this text. Defining the human existence as temporal has been one of the fundamental assertions of existentialism regards the human beings. That, it is within Time that human beings exist, and it is through Time that the human consciousness shapes, and in Time the finite human nature is discovered, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* exemplifies very well.

The title 'Midnight's Children' itself hints at the importance of time hitched to the text. Our nation was born at that stroke of time along with thousand and one children, thus handcuffing them to history. Their clock-ridden birth made them the children of 'Time' and this Time haunted them the rest of their lives. Midnight is when darkness is at its peak and all powerful, yet towards its end, as day gets nearer. So hope and gloom equally mark their destinies. In short their fate, along with that of the nation is uncertain, inconstant and shaky as 'Time' itself.

The very first paragraph of the text depicts how Time is going to be treated in the text. (O, spell it out, spell it out). The narrative unfolds in the present where the protagonist Saleem Sinai is talking about his birth '...once upon a Time' i.e. in the past, he talks of prophecies before his birth as well as his inescapability from Time in the next three decades of his birth. Such jumbling up of Time is to be seen throughout the text. He makes announcement of things to come as he returns to the present, to say he is thirty-one years old and refers to the Time of enunciation in the second paragraph. He lets us know that Time ("having no further use for me") is running out. Throughout the narrative he keeps himself and the readers aware that he has not much Time left though the reason behind it he reveals later.

Time keeps transforming itself. The first temporal series begins at “One Kashmiri morning...in 1915” (page 2), when Aadan Aziz hit his nose on the ground. “The world was new again...the valley had beaked its way out...” (2) constitutes the second series with the use of pluperfect. “To reveal the secret of my grandfather” (3) is the third temporality. The pluperfect indicates what transformation has come about after Aadam Aziz returned after his five German years. It was the Time when travellers were not shot at as spies when they took photographs. Time does not always change for the good. “On the morning when the valley,...” (3) is the fourth temporality which anticipates the end of his life. It closes the chronological loop as it joins the first temporality. Such loops and circles, repetitions and digression are deliberately made to link events in an eclectic form.

In the book. Saleem Sinai admits “The past has dripped into me.....so, we can’t ignore it” (28). Therefore in order to tell his story he shifts Time backward and forward according to his convenience, and then to his immediate present where he is animated by a true sense of urgency before his Time comes to an end- “But its time to get things moving” (400) and “to cut a long story short” (405); same as the narrator of Prousts’ ‘In Search Of Lost Time’ describes himself during his writing of luvre. Play with the referential time becomes paramount as conventional chronology ceases to exist. Time becomes the catalyst of the narrative’s dynamics.

Hence Time is in constant shifts. We have instances of analepses and prolapses. Analapses means evoking an event in retrospection at the juncture where story is, and prolapses means evoking an event in advance. The biggest prolapses, in terms of reach(i.e temporal gap between the instances on the story where the narrative is interrupted and the event) is manifested when in Book One, Saleem announces the time of his birth, and then goes on to describe the Kashmiri morning in 1915. The loop ends in chapter eight, when India wins independence and the nation takes birth too, in 1947. We also come to know that Saleem is impotent but the event of sterilization leading to his emasculation comes towards the end of the text. Such long breaks arouses curious itching in the reader. This oscillation between ‘before’ and ‘after’ is mimetic of the orality of the narrative, in which “what is cancelled out is Time, in the temporal zero point that is the unique instant.”

References to the moment of interruptions are numerous in *Midnights’ Children*. The continuous present of narrative as in Descartes’ works, is an attempt to keep renewing one’s existence and one’s Canotes. Canotes is a concept coined by Spinoza which implies a man’s determination to hold on Time, to survive. And so is the reason why Saleem writes his story, in order to enable his son to learn how life works and to remember him. Comparing the narrative in the eternal present enables him to challenge the proximity of an ending; he tries to postpone his death. And he wants his experience to be documented as “We are a nation of forgetters” (27).

Time is an order, a sequence and man has always wanted to fit into it. Ahmed Sinai wanted to rearrange Quran in a chronological order though he could not. Everyone wants to be in pace with Time or ahead of it and register their presence in posteriority, as well as to locate glorious past in antiquity. So we find Ahmed Sinai conjuring a story to make Methwold believe his ancestry in the Mughals. In Pakistan the clock was to run half an hour ahead of India. At this note Mr. Kemel said, Pakistan wants to abscond with a whole thirty minutes. And S.P Butt reacted, “If they can change the time just like that, what is real anymore?” (66). Very true, Time is the only

reality and all other things are relative to Time. Yet man tries to tamper Time, to bend it to his own way as the author does. He makes Lata Mangeshkar sing in 1946, an error pointed out in Ruskin's *Errata : Unreliability of Narration, in Midnight's Children* and places the Time of emergency in 1971, and the war in 1965 and the general election of 1957 as per his narrative needs to put Saleem in the central role in history. Saleem admits the error- "That's where my irrational notion was born to grow illogically backwards in Time" (75). And admitting the error of memory in locating Gandhi's assassination in his story he says "...in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (145) which imply that order and sequence vanish when they are needed the most.

Time is a powerful agency. Man may try to bend Time, but ultimately Time bends man and their convictions. Aadam Aziz began to expect he will start believing in God and "As he aged and world became less real, he began to doubt" (54) his own belief. And he admitted "I started off as a Kashmiri...got a bruise in the chest that turned me into an Indian" (29). Time forced Aadam's mother to step from purdah into gemstone business in public glare. And the same Naseem who said "You want me to walk naked in front of strange men" (24) on shedding purdah, took to sitting in the glass cabinet at a petrol pump hearing and consoling strange men. The influence of the Time led to shedding of innocence of the midnight's children leading to fragments within them, and the eventual disintegration of the MCC- Midnight's Children Conference.

Time is action. What is life? Life too is a span of Time during which actions happen. In the Sunderbans, Time came to a halt, in the absence of action. Saleem and his friends lost track of Time. Time is a boomerang. The past rises to confront the present. Alia takes her Time to take revenge from Amina as "revenge is a dish best eaten cold".

Time is a mental concept. Movement of Time with mind contains the past and heralds the future in *Midnight's Children*. It characterizes the conscience of the narrator "just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as homogenous entity in Time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and now" (312). Tai, the boatmen was timeless, no one knew his age. He was awaiting nothing, as he had nothing to hope or fear to loose, Time was stagnant, unimportant for him, And so was, Tai Bibi, the oldest whore who claimed to be five hundred and twelve. Age matters for those grieve over lost years and get sick of Time, but she still lusted for life. She was young at heart, so Time did not bother her. And when Amina was immobilized with child "Time had come to complete stop" (86), Time was slowing down, but it was not Time, the universal Time that stopped, her perception about Time ceased and slowed down.

And what is hope? Hope is an anticipation of a Time which works to our advantage. When Rani of Cooch Naheen lost hope, she allowed illness to claim her, and Time slowed down for her. Time can damage reality badly. When the agency of Time proves powerful enough, people try to clutch Time "in their mummified fingers and refusing to let it move" (291).

"...overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmatic longing for flights into the safety of dreams." (320). Saleem wanted to escape Time, and if he could as Saumitra, the Time traveler was able to do, he would have done so. But it is inescapable, Father Time had got enraged and finally after a

struggle, “Time lies dead in rice paddy” (319). But the victory is momentary. Time is all powerful.

One must learn to reject the past and submit to the present, as Methwold did, and accepted the fact that British dominion over India was finally over, and Naseem, setting her face against the past, never mourned for Aadam Aziz.

Nadir Khan’s painter roommate had said “I wanted to be a miniaturist and got elephantiasis instead” (37). Similarly Saleem Sinai in order to understand one life, tried to swallow the whole world, swallow Time, and thus he began cracking up with Time- “history pours out of my fissured body...” (28) and he felt “I’m getting heavier by the second...” (92) because of the burden of the past. A history of drainage, sperectomy- loss of hope had started. Even Pia, despite her liaisons and declaration “Me, I’ll be alive” (292), tried to hold on Time but could not help fragmentation within her.

Thus Time plays its own game. It may destroy identity, reducing a ‘piece-of the moon’ to *Buddha* at the age of 26, a man-dog. The deeds of the past, guilt and shame pickled by Time starts gnawing at one’s existence. One starts to feel as if he is thousand years old as Saleem started feeling. But the optimism bug still lingers on, passes on to posterity, from Mian Abdullah to Aadam Aziz, to Ahmed Sinai, to Saleem Sinai.....to the readers.

Padma’s constant interruptions hint at the impossibility of closure of the vicious circle of Time, though classical Time gets abolished. Rushdie in his book attempts at chutnification of history in the grand hope of pickling of Time and portray man as both the victim and the master of Time.

The power of Time works at two levels, according to Bhartrihari – *pratibandha*(prohibition) and *abhijnunNaa*(permission) and both of these apply well to *Midnight’s Children*. The complexity of negotiating temporal experiences in narrative is well achieved by Rushdie. According to Sartre, man is in continuous search for his own self as his temporal nature makes him face constant changes. Man has his temporal boundaries, and he keeps exploring and creative himself and preserving himself in the frame of Time. And Salman Rushdie *Midnight’s Children* is a remarkable example to substantiate the above views.

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