

# Post Modernism: A Critical Perspective on Literature

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## Abstract

The paper makes a Post Modernist analysis of two texts *Midnight Children* and *The Great Indian Novel*.

The term post modernism encompasses the ontological and epistemological queries of socio-cultural-literal aspects of late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike modernism it emphasized ‘local over the universal, differences rather than conformity, the temporal and a state of flux rather than permanence and stability and hybridity rather than purity’ (Nayar, 216). The post modernist fiction displays a fractured narrative sequence which articulates a decentered reality or history.

This paper intends to analyze two individual texts closely, one is that of the pioneer of post modernism in India, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children* and the other which is considered to be Midnight’s grandchild, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*. Salman Rushdie is celebrated as the bandwagon of an altogether new mode of fictional discourse in Indian English fiction. He experimented with new paradigms of techniques which had a tremendous influence on the contemporary writers so much so that his successors were grouped under the name ‘Rushdie’s Children’. He deftly exploited the potential of postmodernism in order to create a new and complex form of fictional writing.

*Midnight Children* is considered as a post-modern epic and a multi faceted piece of work. It combines in itself an autobiographical *bildungsroman*, a picaresque narrative, a political allegory, a surrealist fantasy, a topical satire and a humorous extravaganza. It makes a radical departure from what has been written by Indian novelists in English till that time. *Midnight’s Children* brings heresies in the field of literary creation into the open and transforms them into the trademarks of the Indian English fiction. The main thematic leitmotifs of the novel are pieced together with great skill and subtlety to give a sense of history and the taste of history as a specially concocted *chutney*. In the oriental fashion of story telling, Rushdie presents his novel as one told by the protagonist Saleem Sinai to his beloved Padma. He uses the first person narrative technique in his fictionalisation. The writer’s fecundity of fantasising paradoxically enables him to reconstruct reality as a pattern of relationships between events and people, and between people and people. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, being the most complex character elaborately dwells upon his family history, his birth in Bombay, his babyhood, boyhood and adulthood and the kinds of people he gets associated with in his eventful life.

Rushdie relates a fictionalised and farfetched story of the Indian subcontinent with a combination of Arabian night’s fantasy and raconteur’s humour. The geographical map of India becomes the stage on which the actors/actresses appear and disappear in the novel. Rushdie does not deny the dichotomy between the private and the public rather he demonstrates how the two partake of each other in a curious and often unexpected ways and how the possibilities of a situation may differ depending upon how it is perceived. He celebrates the creative tensions between personal and national identity, playing up and playing with both their polarity and their unity. In O.P. Mathur’s opinion, “The novel is a piece of

‘fiction-fraction’, by one born in India but settled abroad who tries to recreate his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy, reality and vision, time and timelessness” (170). The main thematic leitmotifs of the novel are pieced together with great skill and subtlety to give a sense of history and the taste of history as a specially concocted *chutney*. In the oriental fashion of story telling, Rushdie presents his novel as one told by the protagonist Saleem Sinai to his beloved Padma. He uses the first person narrative technique in his fictionalisation. The writer’s fecundity of fantasising paradoxically enables him to reconstruct reality as a pattern of relationships between events and people, and between people and people. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, being the most complex character elaborately dwells upon his family history, his birth in Bombay, his babyhood, boyhood and adulthood and the kinds of people he gets associated with in his eventful life. At the very outset itself the narrator gives a feel of the entire work by stating that a person’s life is invariably linked to the history of his nation.

*Midnight’s Children* is certainly not a tightly structured novel but it is held together by a scaffolding of images, metaphors and other narrative devices. Rushdie has introduced an altogether new package of technique of demystification in this towering work. He became the pioneer in manoeuvring with the realist mode of writing offering an absolutely fresh fictional experience. Viney Kirpal aptly comments:

*Midnight’s Children* is that fictional creation which, in a way, pulled together all the earlier phases of the Indian English novel—the historical, the social, the political, the psychological, the metaphysical—into one hold all of a book—and concurrently also revolutionised the fictional technique. (“Postmodern” 25-26)

The ingenious craftsmanship of Rushdie is apparent in the employment of two discernible narrative structures in the novel. The superstructure of the world of desire is realised in a rarefied world of fantasy and dreams, and this is superimposed on a world of grim reality. Novel is the field in which Rushdie makes all sorts of stylistic experiments which provides an excellent reading experience. He is a brilliant juggler of words with which he could arrest the attention of his readers. Uma Parameswaran remarks on the stylistic ingenuity of Rushdie:

. . . there are picture windows to which he takes the reader for panoramic views of the historical landscape. There are recurring motifs and murals that are like melodic refrains in symphony. And then there are gargoyles—scatological or pornographic interludes—a few of which are functional and other gratuitous. All in all, certainly not an edifice or stream-lined functionalism but a rambling rococo manor-house. (41-42)

The liberty Rushdie takes with the language does not prevent the discerning reader from perceiving his superior craftsmanship, his masterful satire and sparkling humour. Rushdie made a revolutionary departure from Standard English constructions and implemented semantic neologisms which eventually resulted in the nativisation of the language. Rushdie uses the hybrid language as a sharp weapon which punctures the bubbles of illusion of the political predicament of contemporary India. Rushdie consciously breaks away from the realistic tradition of fictional writing and presents the fictional material through the consciousness of the narrator which refracts it.

Rushdie perfects the technique of magic realism in *Midnight’s Children*. Magic realism has been variously defined as an attempt to transcend the limitations of realism. In other words it is a mask that the reality wears which does not change the essential truth but rather subverts it to the level of acceptability. The scene of action in such a novel is distanced by fantasy which takes reality beyond the real, thereby drawing multiple concerns. In *Midnight’s Children*, magic realism is a device which unites the Indian culture of the past to the contemporary multicultural interface. There is an excessive mixing

of fantasy and reality in the novel. 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. Rushdie endows his protagonist with miraculous powers so that he can enter into the minds of others and understand their secret thoughts and feelings. He employs the method of magnification as a ploy to allow Saleem to see, to know and to report much more than he could as an ordinary mortal. It is a post-modernist technique used by the author for glossing over a span of sixty years by one single narrator. He is invested with extraordinary abilities so that he could move in time and space. He could see his pre-natal past which helps the author to bring forth the ancestral history of Saleem. Shuffling of time by the author can be compared to the shuffling of a pack of cards which is just a prelude to a highly organised intelligent game

Rushdie's narrative technique violates the unities of time and place. He flouted all conventions of linearity by inserting events from the past, present and future. This dislocation of the sequence of events makes a mockery of the unity of time giving a circular pattern to the novel which defies closure and welcomes continuity. Rushdie makes abundant use of both linguistic and aesthetic deviations through which he could defamiliarise the familiar historical events. He playfully divides the novel into different episodes. It is a calculated method to maintain the suspense to arouse curiosity and to give the impression that the story is all of one whole piece. Rushdie makes use of an intricate fictional design to offer a comprehensive vision of the multi-dimensional Indian society. He copiously employs all sorts of narrative devices like metaphor, myth, satire, parody, fantasy, allusions, linguistic experimentation, magic realism etc. in order to capture the history of Saleem Sinai as well as the history of a nation.

Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* reconstructs and subverts the master narrative of the nation *The Mahabharata* proving himself a successful challenger of conventional literary tradition. Being a luminant member in the group called 'Rushdie's Children', he rocked the academe with the publication of the monumental work *The Great Indian Novel* which produced ripples among the Indian intelligentsia. The novel is a recreation of the old tale, the epic, *The Mahabharata* in contemporary terms. Interestingly enough tradition itself is used as a model method to challenge tradition.

Tharoor superimposes the political history of contemporary India on the epic structure of *The Mahabharata* and together both narratives straddle forward to enshrine a holistic portrayal of India's cultural heritage. He demythifies the epic and strips off its heroic grandeur in order to make it befit to the post-Independent political situation of India. He fictionalises the traditional poetic epic and synthesises it with contemporary politics. Tharoor presents the Indian cultural history in the garb of the ancient epic. The historical characters in the book are easily identified with the contemporary political personages of India. Ayyappa Panicker comments:

It is a strange vision of contemporary India retold in the garb of the ancient tale of story telling. Here is narratology contributing directly, unashamedly to the art of the narrative. The saga of the Kauravas and the Pandavas provides the tapestry which when looked at from another angle slowly reveals the lineaments of a super-imposed narrative of national life: the work is a deconstruction veritable of Vyasa's epic *Mahabharata*-hence great India(n) novel. (67)

Like Rushdie, Tharoor too violated all conventional canons of writing and employed postmodern techniques of fictionalisation. *The Great Indian Novel* stands testimony to his successful implementation of fictional tactics like satire, parody, irony, metafiction, humour, symbolism etc. He demythified the

very myth itself and deftly used it as a demystifying agent. If Rushdie is a juggler of words, Tharoor could be considered as a juggler of myths. With sophistication and compelling wilfulness, the novelist used the resources of fiction for providing his vision of the past by working out different mixtures of fantasy and myth. Tharoor has filtered the contemporary history through a dense cover of comedy, critiquing it through the satirical frame or representing it through the rational construct of allegory.

With great ingenuity Tharoor invokes, uses and subverts the socio-political, religious, literary and cultural myths of the country there by deconstructing and dismantling the fundamental traditional assumptions. The demythification is done with a view to question and to expose the underlying imperialist structures. The heroic figures are burlesqued and caricatured in a totally satiric manner. Rushdie had the conviction that the political history of Pakistan could be fictionalised only through tragedy and farce as in his *Shame*. Similarly, Tharoor too felt that the history of India could be refracted only through a satirical lens. He puts the mythic characters in a modern setting and makes a sarcastic commentary on the political episodes and personalities of modern India. The elasticity of the epic narrative helps the author to incorporate a large numbers of incidents, which are not necessary for its historical design.

The use of *The Mahabharata* myth for portraying the rumblings of the contemporary society was an innovative technique by the novelist. Though myth belongs to the cultural tradition of a nation, it is not factually verifiable. Tharoor gives a modern colouring to the antique lore. Here, the aesthetics of subversion works through a complicated embedding of one tale into another, which itself may have been interwoven into another. Finding connections between myth and reality is a characteristic habit of the Indian mind. Ashis Nandy recognises the inherent centrality of tradition possessed by the Indian society when he comments:

In societies like India, where tradition is central, over powering and vital, no writer can avoid grappling with tradition, regardless of whether he sees himself to be made or to be doomed by his past. (47)

Satire is a major fictional technique that Tharoor devises to retell the story of the Indian political situation. He refracts the modern history of India through a satiric prism. His satirical vehicle is full of several forms of irreverent style—puns, word play, light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, playful stories and witty digressions. Due to the special characteristics of the towering master-text *The Mahabharata*, the allegorical framework adopted equips Tharoor with myriad advantages. Tharoor handles political allegory with considerable finesse and felicity. T. N. Dhar opines:

The *Mahabharata* is an appropriate text for writing any account which centres around themes and concerns which are at the heart of Tharoor's rendition of the history of India: power, politics, schisms, personality-clashes, institutional structures, individual and social dharma etc. ("Entering History" 210)

Tharoor employs the postmodernist technique of changing the genders in the case of Priya Duryodhani who is equivalent to thousand Kauravas. Obviously, the author is referring to Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The fact that she equals the whole of Kaurava clan suggests that she is as strong as thousand men. The novel rises to metafictional excellence in being a commentary on the art of story telling as well as a story on its own merits. The novel itself is a testament of historiographic metafiction. A historiographic metafiction is considered as an inverted yet improved model of the conventional historical novel. The multiple narrative strands of the novel are meticulously manipulated to create a

fascinating dialectic between history and fiction. These categories of novels tend to close the gap between the past and the present and desire to rewrite the past in an altogether new context.

*The Great Indian Novel* problematises history by portraying historical events and personalities in order to subvert them. It re-creates or re-presents the past in fiction. The novel therefore ceases to be ordinary fiction and is transformed into historiographic metafiction where the novelist uses history as a base and revisits the past with objectivity and irony.

The intertextuality of Tharoor's novel takes off with its title itself since it adapts and adopts the name of the ancient epic, *The Mahabharata*. He skilfully blends the Kurukshetra battle in the epic text and the historic freedom struggle of India. The choice of *Mahabharata* as the master text provided the author with immense space in incorporating the themes, concerns and his disillusionment with the post-Independent political situation of India. Upon the foundation of history, Tharoor builds up a dramatic extravaganza with a contemporary cast of political characters for a serious and ironical re-consideration and re-presentation of recent Indian history. Hence, it gets elevated from being an ordinary fiction to the level of historiographic metafiction.

Parody is an all-pervading feature in the case of *The Great Indian Novel* right from its very title, theme, style treatment and technique. Parody is also an effective demystifying weapon used by Tharoor in his brilliant assessment of contemporary history. The parodic and self-parodic intent embedded in the textual structure provides the novelist with the necessary distancing from his culture and tradition. The parodic mode also acquits the author of the most sacrilegious and blasphemous mutilation of the sacred epic text. It gives him excessive freedom in lampooning even the divine. Tharoor names the title of the eighteen books in his novel with the parodic inversions of several well-known works with Indian settings.

Tharoor denies a closed structure to his narrative, which definitely is a typical postmodern fictive strategy. It lays premium on process rather than on the product. The open-ended structure suggests the continuation of the historical process- the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* heralded the arrival of post modernist sensibility in Indian literary scene. It is pivotal in the history of Indian English fiction in that it popularised, if not inaugurated a new way of writing in India. Fiction is interpolated between the historical events and the reader, effecting a displacement of the master narratives of history into a secondary level of the text. Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor belong to the same plane of artistic temperament in their perception of the political situation in India and also in encapsulating it using postmodern fictional methods

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