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## **THE POSTMODERN NOTION OF HISTORY IN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS: A STUDY**

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### **Abstract:**

*Salman Rushdie's novels can be seen as profound commentary on the representation of history and politics in the postcolonial countries, especially India and Pakistan. The themes of his novels such as identity crisis, representation of history and politics, migrations between eastern and western societies etc. are often represented from a postcolonial deconstructive historical perspective. There is no doubt of the fact that the historical details serve as the core background in Rushdie's novels to voice critical socio-political issues and the treatment of history in his novels is very different from traditional historical novels. The novels of Rushdie explore the history of politics and the politics of history perpetually informing and writing each other.*

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, History, Politics, Postcolonial, Representation, etc.

Sir Ahmad Salman Rushdie, famously known as Salman Rushdie, is one of the major writers in postmodern English literatures who dealt with thematic variations clubbed with technical literary brilliance. The novelist addressed the socio-economic and emotional corners of human existence in his myth breaking novels. Hence, the painful plight of the former colonies at the verge of neo-colonialism and globalization caught his attention in his writings. The novels of Salman Rushdie can be seen as a critique on the social, political, religious or economic challenges and experiences in the postcolonial countries, especially India and Pakistan. The novels of Rushdie explore the history of politics and the politics of history perpetually informing and writing each other.

Born during the crucial period of Indian independence (June, 19, 1947) into a Muslim family of Bombay which originally hails from Kashmir, Rushdie left India at the age of fourteen and went to England for higher studies. In the meantime his family also left India for Pakistan. The sense of being uprooted and being in exile, thus, always cast a shadow in his works. Many of his novels are set in the Indian subcontinent and one can find the intermingling of western and eastern experiences in his writing. The themes of his novels such as identity crisis, representation of history and politics, migrations between eastern and western societies etc. are often represented from a postcolonial deconstructive historical perspective. Rushdie's novels deeply analyses the postcolonial historical, political and social structures of the third world countries by drawing a comparative analogy to the west. His novels seem to make the readers realize that a great deal needs to be done to reform the political system so as to uplift the socio-economic status of the people in the third world countries.

Salman Rushdie's writings can be seen as profound commentary on the representation of history and politics. There is no doubt of the fact that the historical details serve as the core background in Rushdie's novels to voice critical socio-political issues and the treatment of history in his novels is very different from traditional historical novels. For instance, the historical novels of Walter Scott are set in a real historical period and the plots generally move around real historical facts. Moreover, if a writer presents an alternate history, those counter-historical events strongly need to have origins within some



commonly accepted view of the past. Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction', a term coined by her in late 1980s, becomes relevant here where she states that "the simultaneous and overt assertion and crossing of boundaries is more postmodern" (Hutcheon 113); and that "historiographic metafiction, not historical fiction, serves to narrate the past" (Hutchson, 112). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Hutcheon argues that works of historiographic metafiction are "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 115). The intermingling of historical and fictional in the novel leads to subversive formation of alternate histories which interrogate fixities, accuracies, authenticity and objectivity of historical narratives. Novelists like Salman Rushdie, who seem to incline more towards a postmodernist worldview, tend to offer a deconstructive notion of history in stark contrast to the traditional, established notion of history. Thus, the novels in their hands do not remain a medium to present history but it becomes an instrument to represent history by critically analysing, interpreting and even creating the historical facts. The notion in this kind of critical handling of history is foregrounded on the postmodernist thought that no facts presented in the historical discourse are absolute as every fact comes filtered through individual or collective perspective.

The political issues in the novels of Rushdie are interlinked with the historical details where the historical context provided is often presented in a fragmented, doubtful and non-chronological way which reflects Rushdie's postmodern perspective towards history. The postmodern scholars contend that historical context provided may not be necessarily true because the author's as well as the readers' own experiences and biases influence the text. Foucault's archaeological and genealogical approaches towards history are very relevant in this context. In *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *The Order of Things* (1966), the famous French philosopher and critic Michel Foucault brings out his critical observation that systems of thought and knowledge are governed by power and it operates beneath the consciousness of individual subjects defining a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the historical perspective in a given domain and period. On the other hand, *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential works of Foucault* (1954-1984), explains that the mundane or events of inglorious origins hardly find a place in a progressive history. His point of a genealogical analysis shows that a given system of thought is the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of established facts and trends. The grounds of true and false are, thus, distinguished not by variable facts but by mechanism of power. So, there is no "Truth" in the absolute sense. All political and social forms of thought are inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power. The power/knowledge paradigm and the genealogical approach form a close connective between Foucault and Rushdie. Joel Kurotti in *Salman Rushdie: New Critical Insights* (2003), observes: "It is quite striking how closely the view of history in Rushdie's texts coincides with those one finds in Michel Foucault's texts. Especially that the genealogical approach, in contrast to the historical is of great importance, as well as the power/knowledge paradigm ..." (Mittapli, 87). In *The Empire Writes Back: Language and History in Shame and Midnight's Children*. *Past the Last Post: Theorising Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (1990), Aruna Srivastava also identifies Rushdiean approach to history as Foucauldian since genealogy plays a fundamental role in the reconstruction of history in *Midnight's Children*.

These postmodernist strands mentioned above turns the attention to New Historicism according to which a body of writing emerges from a particular social, political, and cultural environment over the course of time. New-Historicism, thus, explores the origin of the texts tracing their development and significance within the specific historical contexts. The emergence of New Historicism can be traced back to Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977), which offers a rehistoricization of literary studies in England and America, and Edward Said's, *Orientalism* (1978), which provides an alternate outlook to the Eurocentric cultural discourse. The books suggest that any text has the historicity



inherent in it as it is embedded in the social and cultural context but the history does not have a claim to textuality as we have no authentic access to the past and only traces of it are preserved. As a result, New Historicism treats a work of literature considering the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. According to Stephen Greenblatt New Historicism is “a shift away from a criticism centred on 'verbal icons' toward a criticism centred on cultural artifacts” (Greenblatt, 3). The theory of deconstruction opines that a single or fixed meaning should not be attributed to the word in the text. A text is open to indefinite, independent and often conflicting voices. Similarly, New Historicism points out to the fact that a work is not an autonomous body of fixed meanings but represents a diversity of dissonant voices and unresolved conflicts in a specific culture. The major difference between New historicism with post-structuralism lies in the point that while the later tries to bring out meanings from a close reading of the text alone, the former attempts it to do it more from analysing the cultural context in which the text is embedded.

Rushdie's novels often have a sharp political edge which is again very much connected with New Historicism. From a political point of view it can be said that New Historicism is liberal and accepts all forms of differences and deviances. While the Marxist liberation is only centred on the working class, the deconstructionists like Foucault shifted the focus from the working class to the other exploited and marginalized voices such as the insane, the prisoners, the homosexuals, the women-oppressed, the refugees etc. Rushdie's novels too question the place of the oppressed and marginalized; and as a result, the postcolonial concepts such as subaltern, hybridity, transnationalism, nationhood etc. become vital to understand the representation of history and politics into the intricate texture of Rushdie's novels.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1983), is a glaring critical outlook on almost every incident that occurred in Indian history from the Jalianwala Bagh massacre (1919) to the foundation of Janata party. The novelist has linked up the story of Saleem Sinai with the fate of the Indian subcontinent and in this way the novel becomes a national allegory. By relating fictional lives to communal events, Rushdie not only presents an all-inclusive exploration of the nation but also discovers the ways in which history is structured and restructured through the telling and retelling of individual experiences. In other words, *Midnight's Children* is a critique on India's cultural and political situation, strongly criticised from a historical perspective. The novel takes a round from the year 1915 and explains India's situation after it gained its Independence from the British colonizers; it describes Gandhi's *Quit India* movement, the violent partition of India into

Through *Shame* (1988), Rushdie presents a symbolic diary of the real life encounters between Pakistani Prime-Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Army chief, General Zia ul-Haq, by modelling his fictional characters on them. In comparison with *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* has a larger historical core which provides an exhaustive analysis of Pakistan's social and political history after partition. The novel projects Pakistan as the country of shame which is filled up with military coups, chaotic elections, religious hypocrisy and greedy, treacherous, nasty leaders who constantly violate the ideals, purity and faithfulness of democracy. *Shame* also criticises the collective responsibility of the people of Pakistan for allowing inhuman things to happen in their country.

Published in 2000, *The Moor's Last Sigh* moves to several peripheries, from Cabral Island to the metropolis of Malabar Hill, Bombay, one of the earliest routes of colonial; and then steps out of the frame, goes abroad to Alhambra in Benengeli Spain. The location shifts from the East to the West. No doubt, the structural movement alludes to the author's diasporic and hybrid inclination. Rushdie seems to focus on the postcolonial history by drawing the travails of colonial and postcolonial India and the Muslim era of Spain. The story of Boabdil and the painting entitled, “The Moor's Last Sigh” that haunts the Zogoiby family, become relevant to unveil the politics played on the multicultural historical backdrop in India. It seems that Rushdie is harking back to the period of Muslim era of Spain, when two



antagonistic cultures such as Christianity and Islam co-existed without harming each other, to emphasise on the ideal of unity in postcolonial multicultural nation like India. The novel posits Salman Rushdie as a promoter of plurality and multiplicity.

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), Rushdie upholds the political issues from a different aspect. He questions the historical dominance of Europe and North America politically, economically and culturally in the backdrop of modernity and globalization. The novel is at once a celebration of a fluid, hybrid vision of contemporary life but also presents a darker portrait of the fragmented, discordant nature of hegemonic power-politics. The novel illustrates the absurdity, irony and contradiction inherent in the very concept of globalization. On one hand, globalization signals a literal and symbolic opening up of the world to the heterogeneous cultures and identities that comprise it; on the other hand, globalization also brings with it hegemonic power-politics against which national and socio-cultural entities must form their own sites of resistance. The two protagonists of the novel, Ormus and Vina, are presented as the superstars of rock music. Music, in this novel, is presented as globalised cultural phenomenon that has the ability to cross all frontiers and uphold the message of universal communion.

The novel, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), narrates the history of post-independence Kashmir with a gradual decline of its inherent plurality and multiplicity. The novel also focuses on the role being played by first world nations in the political scenario of Kashmir. Rushdie shows in the novel how gradually the composite culture is destroyed by the militancy. Before 1947 there was no point of dispute between Hindu and Muslim. The novelist is shocked at the methods of counter terrorism executed by the armed forces deployed by the government with the intention of protecting and safeguarding the natives of the valley. By raising a series of questions the narrator scornfully spotlights how the common Kashmiri populace is maltreated not only by Pakistani terrorists but even by the Indian Army.

To conclude, it can be said that Rushdie's novels, although fictions, have always a tinge of history and politics. Although the characters and incidents are fictional, they are always the caricature of the real events and persons. His use of magic realism, non-linear narrative, intentional factual misinterpretations etc. force the readers to question the established historical truths. His novels, intensely embedded in the historical structure, highlight the points through which private, individual life is shaped and modified by the social collective. His novels satirises the utopian vision of India's postcolonial unity among extensive multiplicity. Rushdie's novels, in this way, reflect on a highly complex and multidimensional dynamics of history and politics in the postcolonial world. Indeed, his novels are a kind of metaphor to rewrite the history of politics and politics of history.

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**To Cite the Article:** Pal, Papai, "The Postmodern Notion of History in Rushdie's Novels: A Study." Literary Cognizance, II-4 (March, 2022): 52-56. Web.

