

**Parallel Lines of History: A Comparison of Salman
Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gunter Grass's *The Tin
Drum***

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The postmodernist approach to history is best represented in the genre of fiction, and arguably the most important postmodern technique is that of Magical Realism. The themes and narrative structures of Magical Realism have been profitably used by many writers like Salman Rushdie and Gunter Grass to represent and critique the political and cultural impasse of their times. This paper is an attempt to examine the treatment of history in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* and Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* was awarded the Booker Prize in 1981. Ever since, it has received praise from critics for its richness in variety of subject matter and narrative technique. As for subject matter, the book was said "to cover everything about India: a hundred years of British rule, Independence, Partition, the war with and the carnage in Bangladesh, the existence of various minorities on the Indian subcontinent" (Nazareth 169). So far as the narrative

technique is concerned, Rushdie is said to have owed a great deal to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. *Midnight's Children* is a great novel that deals with almost everything about the author's home country, and achieves this end by means of a discursive and varying narrative technique in the tradition of *Tristram Shandy*. It is certainly not the first modern novel to do so. The most obvious forerunner of *Midnight's Children* in the above-mentioned aspects is *The Tin Drum* by the German novelist, Gunter Grass, written in 1959. It belongs to the collection titled *Danzig Trilogy*. Grass manages to cover everything about Germany, and he employs a narrative technique which must have been one of the models for Rushdie's narrative strategies.

Midnight's Children, like *The Tin Drum*, attempts to retell the nation's history by linking it to the personal story of a family and, more particularly, the story of the birth and growth of a child. This narrative strategy unveils the emerging pattern of history, that is, the author's particular interpretation of the history of his own nation. Saleem Sinai, the young narrator-critical, pedantic, cynical, and sometimes full of irony and wit- makes sure that one is constantly aware of the fact that he is the mirror of India's history. Newspapers celebrate his birth, politicians ratify his position, and public announcements punctuate his life. On the occasion of his birth, he receives a letter from the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru: "Dear Baby Saleem, Mybelated congratulations on the

happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” (MC143). And, throughout the novel, Saleem reminds us of the close connection of his destiny with that of India’s history. Oskar Matzerath, the narrator in Grass’s novel- also critical and pedantic, but mostly cynical- does not get public recognition at the time of his birth, but the trajectory of his life becomes a parallel for the history of his nation. Thus, his refusal to grow up and his decision to remain a dwarf until the end of the Second World War mirror Germany’s inability to grow up, and his destructive powers draw comparison to the destructive powers of the Nazis. So, the personal history of both the protagonists, Saleem and Oskar, reflect their nations’ histories at large.

But history, in both novels, starts before the protagonist’s birth. Both narratives begin with the story of the narrator’s grandparents. The reader is drawn to an understanding of the political and social conditions at the time of the grandparents’ marriage. At the same time, the narrative also focuses on the strange and rather unusual personal encounters between their grandfather and grandmother. Oskar’s Polish grandmother, Anna Bronski, is sitting in a potato field in autumn, when some Polish soldiers chase poor Joseph Koljaiczek across the field. To save his life, Anna hides Joseph under her voluminous skirts, and the

child thus conceived is Oskar's mother. Saleem Sinai, on the other hand, tells of his Kashmiri grandfather Aadam Aziz, a medical doctor. One day, Aadam is called to the house of the landowner Ghani, who wants him to treat his daughter Naseem. But Aadam is not allowed to see the whole body of his charming patient; a bedsheet with a small hole in its center is held up so that he can only see the part of Naseem's body that needs treatment. He falls in love with her piece by piece, and eventually asks for her hand in marriage. In both novels, the grotesque circumstances of the grandparents' mutual sexual attraction signal the absurdity of many of the events to follow in the narrative. And this, in turn, foreshadows the grotesque and absurd situations that become the history of the nation - situations that can only be expressed through surrealism.

Saleem feels himself bound to the important and decisive events in India and Pakistan as well. His birth coincides with the birth of modern India on August 15, 1947. At one point, he tries to analyze the Prime Minister's letter, and asks the crucial question: "How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively" (MC 285). He feels that the conjecture of his birth and that of the nation has given him a special status- that of a savior. After having experienced many difficulties, wars, atrocities and similar situations, Saleem acquires a particular sympathy for

his own country: “I had already decided to save the country” (MC 461). His ultimate motive is to save the present through the preservation of the past. This is portrayed through the metaphor of the pickle jars. As the narrative draws towards the end, he often describes his chapters as pickle jars, in which he hopes to preserve his concept of the past, which in turn finds expression through the metaphor of chutnification. He speaks of “the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time” (MC 548), and explains, “To pickle is to give immortality, after all” (MC 549). “One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth” (MC 550).

In *The Tin Drum*, Grass too employs similar metaphors with a slightly different end in mind. After witnessing a fisherman catching eels out of the Baltic Sea on Good Friday, Oskar Matzerath’s mother first refuses to eat fish, but then, after having been reminded of her unhappy marriage by her friend Jan Bronski, starts to devour all sorts of fish, and eventually dies of fish poisoning. The religious undertones are obvious. The fish, as a symbol of early Christianity, signals defiance; and Good Friday, evoking Christ’s role as the Redeemer, signals a kind of martyrdom on the part of Agnes Matzerath. Christianity was indeed the only hope for many people in those troubled years in the late 1930s, especially in a

city like Danzig. After the war, Oskar draws our attention to a strange nightclub in Dusseldorf, “the Onion Cellar,” where the guests perform a ritual preparation and consumption of onions in order to weep and then be free to talk more openly to each other. Thus, they manage to come to terms with their traumatic past. The author points out:

At last they were able to cry again. After this cataclysm at twelve marks eighty, human beings who have had a good cry open their mouths to speak. Still hesitant, startled by the nakedness of their own words, the weepers poured out their hearts to their neighbours on the uncomfortable, burlap-covered crates, submitted to questioning, let themselves be turned inside-out like overcoats (TD 517).

The recent past is not pickled, but turned into an onion, and so there can be a new beginning. This is possible only if people have learned their lesson and let themselves be turned inside-out. In a way, this nightclub finds a corresponding establishment in *Midnight's Children*. When Saleem returns to Bombay after the destruction of the magicians' ghetto in Delhi, he finds that his parents' flat has been replaced by a nightclub, the Midnite-Confidential Club, “that place outside time, that negation of history” (MC 541).

Both novels are set in geographical spaces claimed by several ethnic or religious groups. The temporal setting is also significant because the events take place at a time when great changes are about to take place. Whereas the Danzig area and parts of northern Poland in the 1930s were subject to disputes and animosities between Germans, Poles, and Kashubians, the Indian subcontinent of the time before Partition was characterized by power struggles between the English, the Hindus, and the Muslims. The conflicts in the two countries extend to language as well. At the time of the rise of the Nazis in Danzig, Polish was considered an inferior tongue by many Germans. Oskar's mother is married to a true German from the Rhineland, but her lover is a Pole. Oskar himself witnesses the siege of the Polish post office in Danzig by the Germans. He witnesses the event as a German boy, but perceives it as a Pole. Saleem Sinai is no less affected by rivalries between two linguistically different groups. His father's friend Dr. Narlikar is killed in a protest march of one such faction. The drama extends to Saleem and his playmates as well. The rivalries between conflicting factions-religious, political, or linguistic, are used by Saleem as a pointer to the implicit dichotomies in history-Indo/British, Hindu/Muslim, rural/urban, non-violence/brutality.

Both novels under discussion are also novels about the phenomenon of war. It is, among other things, an effort to assimilate the oppressive guilt feelings of a

whole generation. The novel tries to achieve this through alienation of the historical facts by means of a distorted and distorting perspective. Oskar writes his whole story in a mental hospital after the war. He reports the events from the perspective of a child and does not draw a moral conclusion from the events. At the age of three, he refuses to grow any further and decides to remain a dwarf. On the other hand, he has acquired extraordinary powers of insight from the time when he was an embryo, and this power of insight grows into telepathy. Saleem Sinai's story reports several wars, the most effective description being the Bangladesh War in 1965. Saleem as a spectator of the atrocities of the war remains as detached as that of Oskar's. This becomes evident when the eleven-year-old Saleem stays with his Uncle Zulfikar in Rawalpindi. Saleem witnesses the political decision that eventually incites wars. Though he does not condemn the machinations of power and political ambition, the contrast between his aloofness and his uncle's involvement shows up the problematical nature of such decisions. The report of war narrated through the eyes of a child in Grass's novel is a critique directed against the adult world; criticism of the world's civilization, particularly that of the West. Neither Oskar Matzerath nor Saleem Sinai are ordinary children. They have serious defects. Oskar's refusal to grow after the age of three has already been mentioned. On the whole, Oskar is a most difficult child for his parents. Saleem has physical defects: an oversize nose that often causes sinus problems, a banged

forehead, part of a finger missing, and a patch of hair torn off, the two latter defects resulting from school experiences. In spite of these handicaps, Oskar Matzerath and Saleem Sinai are both very powerful in their immediate environments. Oskar is not completely innocent in the deaths of his mother and father. Saleem develops his power through knowledge, and is in a way responsible for at least two deaths.

The detachment with which historical events are reported extends to private affairs as well. Both critical narrators spy on their own mothers. Oskar's mother has a constant lover, Jan Bronski, and Oskar calls him "Jan Bronski, who lived by my mother's flesh, who, as to this day I believe and doubt, begot me in Matzerath's name" (TD 127). This uncertainty, or rather confusion, about the narrator's parentage is more complicated in the case of Saleem Sinai, who was exchanged for another baby who was also born at midnight. The other baby, called Shiva, grows to be an alter ego of Saleem. In both novels, the seriousness of the historical events is mitigated through the use of humour. In Grass's novel, Oskar spends the night at the Polish post office, sleeping in a laundry basket and ruminating on the various letters in the basket, and in the morning, he is awakened by the sounds of approaching German aggression:

Consequently I was not awakened by the letter which a certain Lech Milewczyk in Warsaw had written his niece in Danzig-Schidlitz, a letter alarming enough to have awakened a millenarian turtle; what

woke me up was either the nearby machine-gun fire or the distant roar of the salvos from the double turrets of the battle ships in the Free Port (TD 216).

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's grandfather pays regular visits to his patient, who is veiled by the perforated bedsheet: "Far away the Great War moved from crisis to crisis, while in the cobwebbed house Doctor Aziz was also engaged in a total war against his sectioned patient's inexhaustible complaints. And, in all those war years, Naseem never repeated an illness" (MC 23). Another example of humour against the canvass of history occurs when Doctor Aziz is rescued from almost certain death in the great massacre of Amritsar just because of his bad sneeze, which appears to be caused by the enormous size of his "Kashmiri nose" (MC 35)

On a closer reading of the novel, the similarities in the narrative mode, makes itself very apparent. There are digressions within digressions which interrupt the main thread. There are flashbacks, reminders of past and future events. Characters' names may be introduced hundreds of pages before they appear themselves and remembered hundreds of pages after their deaths. Very often, the effect is one of simultaneity of past, present, and future. There are constant changes between straightforward narrative, fairy-tale style, newspaper report, court evidence, school essay, public speech, and other variations of the narrative mode.

The narrator addresses the reader personally. He confesses that he can be reluctant to tell certain things, he can try to mystify his narrative or to puzzle the reader on purpose, he can make sure after irregular intervals that the reader keeps some memorable events in mind, he can warn the reader, move through space and time, repeat himself endlessly, produce special effects and conjuror's tricks, and he can play the wildest variations on syntactical structures. All these qualities are common to Gunter Grass and Salman Rushdie (or their narrators, respectively). Rushdie's prose has been said to suggest the chant of Indian traditional texts. This may very well be the case, but it also suggests his indebtedness to Grass. In this respect, Rushdie appears as the true mediator between Indian tradition and Western experience. The particular atmosphere created by the narrative mode in both novels does not only allow for epic dimensions and thus for the serious subjects treated, but it is also highly entertaining. The atmosphere is worthy of a narrative dealing with national history as well as individual biography. The variation in syntax and style does not channel the reader or critic into one particular interpretation of history, but it leaves ample room for conflicting views. Nevertheless, the individual characters and events do not lose anything of their accuracy.

The narratives of both writers, Grass and Rushdie, are replete with details. They have been successful in re-creating the "spiritus loci" of the city they chose to write about. The reader of *The Tin Drum* sees the streets and buildings of old

Danzig come to life again, the Stockturn, the Max-Halbe-Platz, the Jeschkental Forest, the Kohlenmarket, the Theatre, the Church of the Sacred Heart, and the Number nine streetcar line past the Saspe Cemetery to Brosen on the Baltic Sea. *Midnight's Children* recreates the "spiritus loci" of Bombay. There are also parts of the novel which give a strong impression of Delhi and even of Karachi. But the flavour of Bombay, the sights and smells of that great city as conveyed by Saleem, is definitely the most detailed. The impression is ingrained through constant repetition of certain names of streets or quarters, the true atmosphere of the place. Saleem gives us a history of Bombay before his parents moved to Methwold's Estate. This estate in many ways represents the history, colonialism and Independence, because the Englishman who had it built, William Methwold, moves out on August 15 1947, when India gains independence. The new owners of Methwold's Estate are Indians, and they leave a number of things unchanged, like for instance, the cocktail hour. Methwold's Estate, although divided up into several apartments, assumes the position of a nucleus from which young Saleem starts to explore the marvels and idiosyncrasies of Bombay. More than once, Saleem cries out: "Our Bombay!"(MC 146) Names like Colaba Causeway, Marine Drive, Warden Road, Kemp's Corner, Breach Candy, Mahalaxmi Temple, Chowpatti Beach, and even some of the common advertisement placards of the period, all melt into a compact image of the city of Bombay:

Now, looking back through baby eyes, I can see it all perfectly — it's amazing how much you can remember when you try. What I can see: the city, basking like a bloodsucker lizard in the summer heat. Our Bombay: it looks like a hand but it's really a mouth, always open, always hungry, swallowing food and talent from everywhere else in India. A glamorous leech, producing nothing except films bush-shirts fish. (MC 146).

In spite of the glamorous greed, Saleem must be in love with this bloodsucker lizard. Even later in the novel, when he tries to describe the atmosphere of Karachi, he is immediately thrown back to Bombay in his thoughts: “I won't deny it: I never forgave Karachi for not being Bombay” (MC 368). Thus, the “*spiritus loci*” of Bombay is one of the supreme features of this book and is responsible for a great deal of warmth in an otherwise cold world.

Concerns of literature include in its purview issues related to history as well. Both Germany (the defeat of Germany) and India (Partition of the Indian subcontinent) had undergone harrowing experiences after the Second World War. The intensity of these traumatic experiences required a novel narrative strategy. Apparently, Magical Realism eschews the patterns of grand narratives, but inherently assumes the structure of one. Magical Realism combines in itself both fact and fantasy, a fantasy devoid of romanticism yet accessible to the ordinary

reader. The ethos of the postmodernist situation that is the typical “Catch 22” situation probably required such a strategy for effective narration of the history of the two nations. So, it appears the intermingling of various strands of narrative techniques enhances the importance of the theme making the works attain the magnitude of a modern epic.

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