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*Ritu Sharma*

## ABSTRACT

One of the techniques evident in *Midnight's Children* is reader response theory which is successful in creating enough suspense. The present paper will focus on Reader Response theory. It will also share some information about the writer and the novel *Midnight's Children*. It will elaborately discuss the character named Padma. She is a surrogate listener who represents the partial and but obvious behaviour of an ordinary audience of *Midnight's Children*. Salman Rushdie has intentionally depicted Padma's character so that she can become an audience to Saleem Sinai (protagonist) for his narration. Saleem Sinai is the lead character of the novel who is blessed with telepathy and also has an uncommon or unnatural severe sense of nose to find other midnight's children to form midnight conference. Another interesting thing in the story falls at the point when Saleem's birth is switched with another character named Shiva who later as the story develops becomes his rival. At times we find Padma as an impatient listener who is mainly interested in the main plot.

**Keywords:** reader response, reading, audience, Indian aesthetician, magical realism.

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## ABSTRACT

*One of the techniques evident in Midnight's Children is reader response theory which is successful in creating enough suspense. The present paper will focus on Reader Response theory. It will also share some information about the writer and the novel Midnight's Children. It will elaborately discuss the character named Padma. She is a surrogate listener who represents the partial and but obvious behaviour of an ordinary audience of Midnight's Children. Salman Rushdie has intentionally depicted Padma's character so that she can become an audience to Saleem Sinai (protagonist) for his narration. Saleem Sinai is the lead character of the novel who is blessed with telepathy and also has an uncommon or unnatural severe sense of nose to find other midnight's children to form midnight conference. Another interesting thing in the story falls at the point when Saleem's birth is switched with another character named Shiva who later as the story develops becomes his rival. At times we find Padma as an impatient listener who is mainly interested in the main plot. Rushdie as a narrator raises question through Padma to which Saleem Sinai has to satisfy and likewise the chain of narration moves on.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

I A Richards is the influential figure in establishing Reader-response theory. He believed that "one is never the same before and after reading the text" (192.) Readers Response theory appeared and became prominent in 1960's. Basically this theory deals with reader's response towards particular text. This theory on the contrary with the other theories does not give attention primarily to author or to the content. It

is a study that analysis the interpretation of text done by the reader. The approach of the reader remains aesthetic in analyzing it that beautifies the understanding of the text for him/her. According to German critic Wolfgang Iser, text does not contain any meaning within it. The meaning is generated only through the reading process. It is the reader with whom the text comes in direct contact. Therefore before making an elaborative discussion about text and its interpretation readers identification is essential to support this theory. How a reader should be. And what should be assumed while a text is produced by the author. Both author and reader are never in a direct contact with each other.

Hence the reader is in a broad way divided in two categories: an ideal reader and second one the actual reader. Further Iser talks about the efficiency that implied reader i.e. the ideal reader possess who works in both ways in interpretation of text. He is the one who is connected with the text to analyze it with conscious mind. Second category of readers is the outside reader: the actual reader. The actual reader is rational, holds knowledge and has experience about the outside world. The actual reader analysis the text in context with his/her own personal understanding. To all it means that reader as per his/her age and emotional baggage interprets the text. Even sometimes the reader relates the text with them. The interpretation of the text changes as the age changes of the reader varies. It is not always the same interpretation that a reader will come up with. The same text can be understood differently by the same reader after repetitive study of the text. It demands active participation of a reader to construct meaning out of the words and phrases from paragraph to paragraph scene to scene and chapter to chapter. A reader is not mere reader but a writer as well during the activity of listening

because interpretation comes only after making some assumptions while reading.

The New Criticism theory ignores the reader's participation in the re creation of text. This theory does not believe in readers' involvement to make the text productive. It does not emphasize on author's intention or on readers psychology. It believes that the meaning of the text lies within the text itself. But on the contrary as Stanley Fish says, "Objectivity of the text is an illusion." A text is not an independent work reader plays significant role in developing text with its own understanding and interpretation towards it.

Louise Rosenblatt the prominent critic of transactional Reader Response theory says that literary work is the outcome of a business that occurs between a reader and the text. In a text gaps (that are far away from the facts in the text) would be produced which holds indeterminate meaning that forces a reader to create meaning with its own understanding. Meaning remains absent in the text until reader generates it. Production of the meaning is the evidence that proves the importance of reader to respond the text. Iser clarifies the process of concretization which is done by a reader in a text produced by the author. The category of Affective Stylistic in Reader Response theory is related with Stanley Fish who speaks on a closer observation in analyzing text. Text is produced by the formation of meaningful words that converts the reader's analysis into felt experience. For him every meaning is an event and it is an endless interaction through printing mode.

The observation of Reader Response theory with two complex readers in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* one reader that Rushdie has depicted: Padma the inside reader as an 'intended reader' whom he had in his mind when he produced the text. She is an uncritical audience or can also say that she is an ideal critical audience who accepts whatever Saleem Sinai (the protagonist) narrates in the novel to her. Saleem Sinai takes her in his confidence due to which she consistently listens to his tedious way of narration. Rushdie has not much shared about Padma's background therefore she being simple is

curious to know about Saleem's past life, especially his birth. When Saleem turns thirty-one years old he feels that soon he will be dead he discloses all that he has in his mind and heart about his life and people connect to him. Rushdie introduces Padma Mongroli as Saleem's dear companion, loving and sincere caretaker. She is one of the tools utilized by Rushdie to get loyal feedback for his narration. It is Padma only through which Rushdie introduces one of the oldest art form of storytelling performed in India. Padma does not give importance to Saleem's scribbling in comparison to outside readers because she is illiterate therefore Saleem detains to create interest in her until storytelling is done "... She can't read like all fish lovers..." (24).

Padma's behavior varies throughout the storytelling which, was quite expected because she as an individual possesses some characteristic in herself, some principles. As one of Newton's law proves that, 'To each and every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.' Probably this is one of the reasons behind her variety of reaction.

As a listener Padma is controlled and guided by Saleem narration in the listening process. Different adjectives have been used for Padma's queries at times she is passive listener and sometimes she participates actively in between the narration. Padma's criticism functions as guidance to Saleem as a narrator and Rushdie as writer to move in a sequential manner as she says, "... To me it's crazy way of telling your life story. 'She cries, if you can't even get to where your father met your mother ...'" (45).

Saleem confesses Padma's pressure on him that helps him to not to go off track from the main plot. "... Bowing to ineluctable Padma-pressures of what-happened-nextism... I leap forwards from *Mercurochrome* and land in 1942. (I am keen to get my parents together too)" (45)

Padma is a curious listener she tries to help herself to find out Saleem's father quickly reaching to the conclusion in between the narration. "... Is that him? Padma asks in some confusion. That fat soft cowardly plumpie? Is he going to be your father?" (62)

This is pity not only at Padma's part but also as a common reader who is forced to discover Saleem's father after showing some kind of disinterest in his tiresome and over exaggerated narration. Padma feels extremely disgusted after knowing the truth about Saleem's switch of birth and throws tantrum on him for befooling her. Saleem's real identity was beyond Padma's imagination. Padma gets furious and blames Saleem for everything that has happened with him. On the contrary she develops a soft corner for his biological parents. "...You don't care that you mother died giving your life? That your father may be still alive somewhere penniless, poor?" (158)

Padma's refusal and disinterest to listen further does not stop Rushdie as a writer to move on with other interesting events yet to happen. But poor Padma involves herself again to know what happens next. Padma is none the else Rushdie's depiction. Rushdie treats Padma as puppet for his narration through Saleem. Padma responds in full measure to the demands made by text. Padma works in two ways: she responds and constructs the meaning out of text. After an observation one may find Padma with variety of emotions at Saleem's honest narrative confession of his own life. Padma's love for Saleem Senai remains consistent and pure hence after listening to his narration she does not change and readily accepts him.

Another reader is the actual audience (I or You) in contrast with Padma the outside reader faces difficulty in analyzing text. The outside reader finds the novel more complex. The actual reader is a conscious reader. He/ she find many challenges in reading and understanding of the text. The story of *Midnight's Children* seems to open with vague and an informal description of narrator's birth, giving prominence to date and time of birth along with the official Independence of India. The narrator is successful in creating an aura for outside readers about Independence, Kashmir, Aadam Aziz and of course the narrator himself, the protagonist Saleem Sinai. The few lines of the beginning itself reminds of *Narcissism* the term originated from Greek mythology where a young Narcissus fell in love with his own image reflected

in the pool of water. This concept was introduced by Sigmund Freud *On Narcissism* who talks about their own self give importance to it. "...I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time..." '...I was born in Doctor Nallikar's nursing home...' (3)

The outside readers can sense the haste in which the narrator is due to shortage of life perhaps "... now however time is (having no future use for me) is running out. I'll soon be thirty one years... Perhaps. If my crumbling over used body permits." (3-4)

This unease is smoothly passed on to the readers. "... And there are so many story to tell... I have been a swallower of lives and to know me just one of me you'll have to swallow the lot as well..." (4) There are certain events in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* that supports the complexity interweaved in the novel which fails to maintain the aesthetic joy that an outside reader would like to enjoy.

## II. INDIAN AESTHETIC'S PERCEPTION

Indian aestheticians' formulates the term *sahrudaya* in which a reader is capable of identifying himself with the art. It is a path that leads to *paramananda*. To attain this *anada* which is transcendental state (neither painful nor pleasurable) a constant state in which both the subject and the object becomes one unit. Reader's interpretation is a kind of sublime act where a bridge between reader and text if formed and both of them meet and merge in such a way that the gap completes. Hence the reader reaches to the state of *anada*. When a reader analysis spiritual or romantic books (that has nothing to do with the determinate meanings) and evolves in the process of filling indeterminate meaning he/she reaches to the state of *ananda*. Other difficulty that comes in the journey of analyzing text is that the novel shares many voices which are not directly expressed and sometimes they are explicit. There is an analogy of several biographic details between Salman Rushdie and the narrator Saleem Sinai. There are several events common between both of them for instance religious and general family's back ground that it becomes difficult to segregate and confuses the reader in making character-



sketch. Saleem Sinai's life is knotted with the story of nation. (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) The narration of the historical events through telepathic gift is at times complex in understanding and keeping hold with the narrator. There are different genres used in the novel that diverts mind as a reader for example fantasy, realism, post modernism and realism etc. There are series of endless surprises in the novel one after the other that makes the reader feel tired. This novel fails to maintain a single point of view or a single voice. Each division of chapter in itself consist of variety that sometimes a reader gets diverted and loses the grip over past events in the novel.

The complexity of novel with the historical political approach is also difficult to understand with the parallel with Saleem's life's history because of its vastness. Rushdie has introduced all the events that occurred before and after Independence for example 1) protest against British, under Mahatma Gandhi's guidance. 2) Massacre of peacefully protesting Indians in Amritsar by General Dyer. 3) Muslim League partition, 4) forced sterilization of poor youth of India etc.

It is difficult to calculate several symbolic references that Saleem and India suffer together for example Saleem's encounter with Zagallo when he was only ten years old left with bleeding in his head. The nation also suffers from natural disaster the Five year plan is damaged by storm and floods.

As a reader it is not easy to presume what next would be the event that is going to happen. Hence *Midnight's Children* displays through the Reader Response theory that the reader also participates in constructing the text with his/her level and growth of understanding. The understanding changes according to the social, political and historical events in context of reading. Therefore I would say that *Midnight's Children* is not a one time reading text due to its complex interwoven features.

### III. CONCLUSION

In the end I would like to make an interesting analogy comparing Rushdie and the two eminent character of the novel named Padma and Saleem Sinai. It reminds of *Shree Mad Bhagawat Gita's* event 'Observing the armies in the battlefield of kurukshtras in text I' where *Dhrtarashtra* asks *Sanjay* to narrate the scene at the ground of *Kurukshtra* (the battle between Kaurvas and Pandvas.) This can be re-created with Rushdie as a Creator, Saleem working as Sanjay (as a conscious narrator) and Padma/we the blind (symbolic blindness) listener like that of Dhritrashtra depending on the narrator.

Dhrtarastra uvaca  
Dharma-ksetre kuru-ksetre  
Samaveta yuyutsavah  
Mamakah pandavas caiva  
Kim akurvata sanjaya

All the three figures represent the mythological figure as discussed above. Rushdie's reasonable decision of Padma's depiction as a listener realizes a common reader that there is a Padma inside all the readers. Saleem's direct touch with Padma helps to make a creative progress in the story. This was essential at Rushdie's part otherwise who would attempt to raise doubts to make the ideal narration interestingly creative. Saleem never gets irritated by Padma's curiosity and skepticism for his narration. "... but perhaps our Padma will be useful, because it is impossible to stop her being critic..." (35.) The parenthetical sentences in the text are the example of Saleem's direct interaction with Padma.

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