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POSTCOLONIAL INDIA IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVEL MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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Abstract

Midnight's Children tells the dramatic and extraordinary story about postcolonial India. The novel depicts the historic events which shaped the life of India that we know today through the portrayal of personal history of Sinai family. Midnight's Children is a critique of Indian mentality, diversity, politics and history, but at the same time a study on human relations.

In this paper I will try to explore the historic events in relation to the personal affairs. I will focus my attention on the far-reaching consequences of these events on the path of the country and on the individual lives of its citizens. Ultimately, I will attempt to answer the challenging question: Why have the diversity, plurality and cultural and religious differences divided a country and destroyed the lives of so many people, including the midnight's children?

Keywords: India, history, diversity, plurality, religion, postcolonialism.

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Introduction

Midnight's Children, one of the most victorious novels written by a renowned author Salman Rushdie, was published in 1981. To say that this piece of art won many awards and received an immense critical acclaim would be an understatement. It won the Best of the Booker prize, earning the reputation of being the best novel that has been given the prestigious Booker award.

Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of Midnight's Children narrates the intriguing story about postcolonial India. This story does not seem to cease to amaze people for it is a universal study of plurality and diversity. Readers can relate to the characters, either because they discover their own personality traits in them, or because they find parts of their country's history in the depiction of conflicts and wars, or simply because they link the actual stories of the people who were going through these tragedies with the newspapers headlines they read about.

Saleem Sinai is aware that his story will not be suitable to everyone's taste, but he still insists that he is telling the most truthful version he knows and that he is doing it out of love for his country: "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... that they are, despite everything, acts of love."¹

Harold Bloom describes the novel in the following manner: "Midnight's Children" is an ironic, quirky, but deadly serious critique of quiescence, of withdrawal, of forgetting."² It is indeed a fascinating account of one of the most captivating countries in the world, but simultaneously it is a tale about a family, their emotions and their struggles in the face of a tragedy that befell their country. However, in generously sharing the story of himself, his people and his country, Salman Rushdie also teaches us a lesson in the hope that we will come to learn to appreciate diversity and not repeat the same mistakes India has made.

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 644.

² Harold Bloom, *Salman Rushdie* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p.158.

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Historical context

The history of Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie was born on 19 June 1947, two months before India gained its independence from Britain. He originated from an affluent family who lived in Bombay. His father was a businessman who graduated from the Cambridge University and his mother was a teacher. The Rushdies were Muslims, but very liberal when it comes to their viewpoint on other religions and nationalities. After the Partition of India, many Muslims immigrated to Pakistan, but the Rushdie family decided to stay at their home in Bombay. When Salman was 13, he attended a school in London and at very early age he encountered racism: "Of course, I knew that racism is not confined to British. I come from a society where racism is commonplace, between one Indian community and another. But you have to combat racism wherever you find it."³ Therefore, already in his early age his thoughts were directed at different types of racism. After studying history at the Cambridge University, Rushdie moved to Karachi, Pakistan, where his family immigrated in the meantime. Even though he found a job at the television, with his European-educated mind, he had difficulties accepting censorship that prevailed in all the aspects of Pakistani life in regard to religion. As a result, he moved back to London. The binaries that were presented in his personal life when it comes to his origin and his personal sense of belonging were the inspiration for the central plot of Midnight's Children. Goonetilleke writes that: "Rushdie is the kind of cloven writer produced by migration, inhabiting and addressing both worlds, the East and the West, the world of his mother country and that of his adopted country, belonging wholly to neither one nor the other."⁴ Perhaps for this reason he is the best man for the job – the job of describing the true gist of Indian colonial history and all the consequences stemming from it.

³ D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *Salman Rushdie* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), p.3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.6.

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Rushdie has been writing Midnight's Children for five years: "He dedicated it to Zafar as an inheritor of India's legacy and as a sign of his own connection to it and to Islam (his son is given a distinctively Islamic name, though he had settled down in Britain and married a British woman)."⁵

It is quite obvious that Midnight's Children is, in its greater part, an autobiography. When asked about it, Rushdie admitted that the character of Saleem was based on Rushdie himself: "I gave Saleem certain parts of my childhood, so essentially he lives in my house and goes to my school. His friends are composites of people I went to school with. The school bullies know who they are."⁶ In the same interview, Rushdie explained that the purpose of writing this novel was also to highlight all the aspect of freedom, not all of them being positive: "The idea of the Midnight's Children was, yes, it was about my generation, but I also wanted them to embody the possibility. The idea behind giving them magic powers if they were born in the midnight hour was to say, "Freedom is a magical moment, and here is the potential of that freedom." "⁷

The history of India

After the secession of the British rule over India, Britain passed the sovereign power to the two newly formed countries – the Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The Partition of India did not only bring the creation of the new countries, but also brutal conflicts which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. "Never before had anything even remotely like it been attempted. Nowhere were there any guidelines, any precedents, any revealing insights from the past to order what was going to be the biggest, the most complex divorce action in history, the breakup of a family of four hundred million human beings along with the assets and household property they had acquired in centuries of living

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁶ <https://greenglobaltravel.com/salman-rushdie-midnights-children-movie/>

⁷ *Ibid.*

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together on the same piece of earth.”⁸ Its consequences were also the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir and the 1971 conflict over Bangladeshi independence.

The novel is politically centralised around the figure of Indira Gandhi. She was the daughter of the former Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. She was politically popular because of various reforms she employed as well as for the Indian victory in the conflict with Pakistan that resulted in the creation of independent Bangladesh. She declared the State of Emergency in the country between 1975 and 1977, when she was found guilty of an election fraud. With the State of Emergency she limited many civil rights and liberties, censored the media and started the sterilization process. In the novel, “Under the rule of the Widow, India is being made impotent, literally, through vasectomy and, metaphorically, too, as exemplified by the *Midnight’s Children* and Saleem himself. *Midnight’s children* have no power, no hope and no future.”⁹ Rushdie addresses Indira Gandhi as a “widow” in the novel, not only because she was the widow of Feroze Gandhi, but also because “A widow is a figure of ill-omen in Indian culture.”¹⁰ “Midnight’s Children aims at demonising Indira Gandhi and pursues a remarkably elaborate and persistent strategy in order to achieve this. Both the derogatory connotations of widowhood and witchcraft are combined to create the phantasmagorical image of the witch-like Widow who haunts the novel but who is only disclosed at the very end as identical with Indira Gandhi.”¹¹ Midnight’s Children aroused considerable controversy with its publication. The novel was banned in India for the way it depicted the Nehru dynasty. Additionally, Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie for libel and won.

India has always been characterized by the diversity of the people living in it. The Partition was nothing else but an attempt to divide the country along the religious lines and make the Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. What the people aiming to do this failed to realize is that you cannot ask the people to move to another country based solely on the religion. What has to be taken into account is a sense of belonging, many people felt

⁸ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (New York City: Avon Books, 1975), p.207.

⁹ D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, *Salman Rushdie* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), p.34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.34.

¹¹ Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara, *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography – Writing the Nation into Being* (London: Palgrave Macmilan, 2009), p.77.

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attached to India, to the country India used to be, and in spite of that, there were forced to leave their homeland.

Saleem as the representation of the postcolonial India

The story of Saleem Sinai is the story of postcolonial India. The exact moment of his birth was 15 August 1947, at the stroke of midnight. This moment completely coincides with India's gain of its independence from Britain. His birth ties him closely to the country's fate and future. Accordingly, his life is a reflection of the country's ups and down, good times and bad times. "More than a mirror of India, Saleem *is* the multitude of India."¹²

During the first hour of independence, 1001 children were born, all of them with astounding magical powers. The closer to midnight the child was born, the more magnificent and extraordinary their power was. 581 midnight's children were alive by the time Saleem discovered their special gifts. His was the gift of telepathy, he was able to enter other people's minds and get to know their most intimate thoughts, emotions and desires. Saleem's gift of telepathy allows him not only to immerse himself into the minds of other midnight's children, but also into India itself, he is connected to the country through his gift. He is able to hear all of India, through all of its diversity, including different religions. Midnight's children are the most exquisite reflection of India itself. They represent the main characteristics of Indian country – the diversity and plurality. They are all different, they all come from different backgrounds, religions, but they are connected to each other by the precious gifts that they own, gifts which are not always a blessing. "The children of midnight were also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream."¹³ The children are embodiment of the country, of the nation, of its present and its future. Owing to his own

¹² Robert P. Marzec, *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature from Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.166.

¹³ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2013), p.159.

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special power, Saleem organizes a Midnight's Children Conference, so they all meet in his mind for one hour every day. Shiva, who was born at the exact same time as Saleem, has the power of war. He suggests to Saleem that they should be the leaders of the group, which Saleem rejects, wishing for the group to have a greater purpose. Saleem and Shiva, both being born at midnight, represent the contrasting personalities. Shiva is named after the God of destruction, while Saleem represents Brahma, the God of creation. Shiva's personality stems from his upbringing, he was born into great poverty, he was expected by his father to be a beggar, so a lot of his personal frustration and anger can be justified. They together manifest the core differences striking India – rich and poor, Hindu and Muslim. “If Saleem embodies the Indian history of pluralism, Shiva embodies India's parallel history of oppression and intolerance.”¹⁴

India had very high expectations of its newly acquired freedom. The “Times of India” announced a prize for any child born at the exact moment of independence. India manifests its hopes for a better future through its celebration of the independence. People are ecstatic, glorious celebrations are organized, and Saleem himself receives a letter from Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister, who predicts Saleem's connection to the country: “Dear Baby Saleem, My belated 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.”¹⁵ These words turned out to be prophetic, as his life is the mirror of the country in a metaphoric way. However, at the very same night, Shiva, Wee Wilie Winkie's son was born. Mary Pereira, Saleem's future nanny, swaps the babies at birth, in the memory of the man she loved, the revolutionary Joseph. She believed that the actual conflict in India was not between the Hindus and Muslims, but between the rich and the poor, so she wanted to do her part in mending social injustices. Therefore, Saleem's birth mother was Hindu and she died while giving birth to him, and his real father was William Methwold, a British with whom his mother had an affair. Instead of growing up in a poor

¹⁴ Rachel Trousdale, *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination – Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.101.

¹⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2013), p.167.

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Hindu family, Saleem was the privileged boy swapped at birth and grew up in a wealthy Muslim family. Saleem's family background makes him the perfect paradigm of India and all its inner conflicts since he, in a way, comprised in himself everything that was bothering India at the time, having the British father, Hindu mother, but being brought up in a Muslim family. He is the principal symbol of India's diversity and plurality.

When Parvati gets pregnant with Shiva who completely abandons her after hearing the news, Saleem agrees to be the father to her child, as in this case the child would be entitled to their actual grandparents. At midnight on 25th of June, the Prime Minister declares a State of Emergency, allowing her to arrest her opposition and censor the media. At the same moment, Parvati's son is born, continuing the tradition of grand events of Indian history corresponding to major events in Saleem's life. They lived in the magicians' ghetto when the soldiers broke in and killed most of the people residing there. Saleem was captured by Shiva and taken away to Indira Gandhi's imprisonment. Saleem tells his interrogators about the rest of the midnight's children and all of them undergo the sterilization process which results not only in the loss of their reproductive powers, but also in the loss of their magical powers. Saleem's birth represents the creation of Midnight's Children, while his son's birth represents their destruction. While Saleem was born at the time of great optimism and hope for the Indian country, his son was born at the State of Emergency, at the time of despair and chaos. However, even though all the magical powers of the Midnight's Children are gone, Saleem's son magical powers remain. He has big ears, and his power is the ability to hear his father's story. Aadam's first word, "Abracadabra", symbolizes that the magic is not dead just yet, it survived in the new generation of Midnight's Children. At the end of their lives, Shiva and Saleem seem to be restored to the destinies they should have had. Shiva, a child who should have been born wealthy, lived a life of a struggling poor man, but eventually became rich and respected. Saleem, who should have been born poor, lived an affluent life to end up being poor with no house and no family. By destroying Midnight's Children, Indira Gandhi destroyed the hope for the better future, she ruined the best embodiment and characteristic of India, its diversity. Midnight's children posed a threat to her because they were different, "Was the M.C.C. an institution

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of tremendous promise, or was it rather the vehicle of the children's eventual undoing? Was Saleem, as its founder, their saviour or their betrayer? Was the break-up of the M.C.C., of Saleem, of India itself, the end of possibility, a tragedy to be averted at all costs, or was it, on the contrary, an opportunity to be welcomed? Like many others in Midnight's Children, the answer to all these questions is – well – both. And yet, from Saleem/Salman's personal perspective, it comes down quite clearly on one side."¹⁶ Considering the fact that Saleem is the metaphor of India, he himself could be blamed for the tragedy that befell the country resulting in the destruction of everything and everyone that is unique and different. He was the one who excluded Shiva from the M.C.C. which caused Shiva's personal vendetta that ultimately brought the Midnight's Children to an end.

Before his death, Saleem claimed that his body would dissolve into 630 million pieces, which was approximately the population of India at the time the book was written and published. In this way, Saleem also represents not only the Indian country but also each and every citizen of India, in all of their differences and diversities. Having told his story, his purpose is fulfilled, therefore he does indeed fall apart into as many pieces of dust as there are people in India. India has always been a country which includes many different nationalities, religions and cultural influences. However, managing all these distinctions proved to be very challenging, as even India itself ended up in many conflicts and wars over them. Hence, it is only logical that Saleem, the paragon of India's complexities and contrasts, having no solution for India's unity has to disappear and evanesce. The novel ends on a very pessimistic note. As Trousdale notes: "He (Saleem) seems to deny that it is possible to unify or represent India."¹⁷ However, we should not allow the tragedy of Saleem's character to go in vain. At the time when he had no more magical powers and he could not save India, he did the best he could do – told his story. It is now up to us, the readers, to keep his story alive and to learn from it. The book gives the analysis of Indian history. The evidence we receive – Saleem and his feelings, emotions, memories, the stories he heard about and the stories he found out about using his gift – are all subjective. We do

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, *Salman Rushdie* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p.167.

¹⁷ Rachel Trousdale, *Nabokov, Rushdie, and the transnational imagination – Novels of exile and alternate worlds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.93.

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not receive any hard specific evidence in the book, which makes the story more personal and closer to the readers. “Even though Saleem is cracking into as many pieces as there are Indians, as there are stories to tell, he has successfully told his story – imperfect, unreliable, distorted, needing endless revising to be sure – but nonetheless triumphantly his own.”¹⁸

The Aftermath of British Colonialism

Cultural legacy is one of the things left behind by the British influence in India. The people living at the Methwold estate clearly exemplify the Indian state of mind at the time. Even though they did not agree with the conditions that the owner presented to them – to keep the houses in the same British manner and do not change anything, in time they started adopting various British traditions and customs, such as cocktail hour, and enjoying their houses in the British design and décor.

British colonialism also brought the division of India into India and Pakistan and immense bloodshed which economically destroyed the countries and took the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

One of the consequences of the cessation of British colonialism and the following Partition was the migration. This is something that was experienced by the writer himself in his personal life: “Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay (Mumbai), India, in 1947, emigrated to London, England, in 1961, went into hiding in 1989 because of the death sentence issued by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and is currently living in New York.”¹⁹

However, the saddest repercussion of all was the painful conclusion that the diversity that had always been India’s proudest characteristic, was no longer able to exist. This diversity could be best seen by the very people of India, their different religions, colour of their skin, various native languages. Despite all these differences they were still able to live peacefully in a union until the moment of British colonialism when the ideas about the separation began to occupy people’s mind. Nonetheless, the image of the former India, of

¹⁸Harold Bloom, *Salman Rushdie* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p.169.

¹⁹Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature – Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjaerstad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.8.

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how it used to be has become a dream that many people have never abandoned: “Rushdie attempts, with both the M.C.C. and Midnight’s Children itself, to provide a vision of the country he wants India to be: an attempt to imagine a unifying form for the subcontinent as a whole, from Kerala to Kashmir, from Bombay to the jungles of Bengal, a country that has indeed made a fresh start at the moment of independence, in which the differences between Hindu and Muslim and Sikh, Brahmin and beggar, are contained within a single structure.”²⁰ It seems that Rushdie’s novel remained a dream as well.

Conclusion

“Rushdie specifies the ideals that Midnight’s Children celebrate: “My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed. (In Midnight’s Children) the defining image of India is the crowd and a crowd is by its very nature super abundant, heterogenous, many things at once.”²¹ Midnight’s Children remains the biggest celebration of the plurality, diversity, distinctions and differences of India. It shows us how far the things can go if we have a singular point of view. It teaches us to accept other religions, nationalities and cultures, to respect them and cherish them.

Rushdie’s novel can also be observed not only through India, but globally, through the whole world: “Rushdie may epitomize the migrant writer par excellence with all its potential for reinventing the world and the subject of human identity, but the Rushdie affair also places him in a position in which he seems to personify the flip side of globalization – that is, the clash of civilizations, the increasing gap between cultures, and the proliferation of fundamentalism”.²² With this novel Rushdie also raises awareness of the issue that the

²⁰ Michael Edward Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.113.

²¹ D.C.R.A Goonetilleke, *Salman Rushdie* (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), p.45.

²² Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature – Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjaerstad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.132.

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diversity has become throughout the world. Many more conflicts, wars, terrorist attacks are being based on the issue of different religions, nationalities, cultures. Is it possible that the world has sunk so low that it does not appreciate any differentiation?

Unfortunately, Rushdie's novel did not have an influence strong enough to mend the relationship between India and Pakistan. To the present day, these two countries feel animosity towards each other, to that extent that the people of Pakistan are not allowed to enter the Indian country, that the Indian is not allowed to be friends with a Pakistani, that their conflicts made one of the most beautiful parts of former India, Kashmir, a place where no one wants to go because it is fraught with warfare even today.

In another great work written by Salman Rushdie, it is said: "A poet's work, to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep."²³ I consider Mr. Rushdie to be a tremendously courageous man. Since the tensions between India and Pakistan have not only deteriorated over the years, but have also become unbearable, it is very brave to write about the least favourite topic of the occupants of these two countries. Notwithstanding these tensions, Rushdie's novel awakens the feelings of nostalgia and sadness. It remains the greatest testimony to India's postcolonial past and as such, would always be widely popular for both the truths it sincerely tells and the intense emotions it causes with its readers. People may have different opinions regarding the history of India that the plot of the book is focused on, but no one can stay immune to the novel's beauty and truthfulness. As Mr. Harold Bloom has said: "Re-reading Midnight's Children, I do not find it dated, neither do I read it merely as elegy/eulogy to a failed experiment; it remains a celebration of India, a paean to both unity and multiplicity, and both inspiration and challenge to a new generation to supercede it in style".²⁴

²³ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), p.97.

²⁴ Harold Bloom, *Salman Rushdie* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), p.177.

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