

Reclaiming the Past in Midnight's Children of Salman Rushdie

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Abstract: *Postcolonialism represents the historical, social and national issues in a wider perspective. It defines the aftermath of colonisation in the literary and social world that has been affected by the colonial process. Contemporary writers of the previously colonised nations, explore the various strategies of life that have been prevalent during the British rule and thereby expose the subtle strategies employed to make the colonised people accept their subjugated position as something natural and transcendental. They bring out the functioning of power politics that explains the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised even after the end of political imperialism. This phenomenon has been fictionalised by various writers. The postcolonial critics analyse and expose the way in which the colonialists propagated the reality which is constructed by different societies and cultures. Critic Peter Barry, in the book *Beginning Theory*, states, "The first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past and the second step is to erode the colonialist ideology by which the past has been devalued" (186). Most Indian Writings in English can be divided into two categories as pre-Rushdian and post-Rushdian. The concept of nation and history of the nation has acquired focus with the dawn of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie examines the various aspects of the colonial past of India and also foregrounds the events that have taken place in India at the time of independence. His ideas about the society regarding India and his concern for the dignity of man in both national and transnational contexts are clearly revealed*

Postcolonialism represents the historical, social and national issues in a wider perspective. It defines the aftermath of colonisation in the literary and social world that has been affected by the colonial process. Contemporary writers of the previously colonised nations, explore the various strategies of life that have been prevalent during the British rule and thereby expose the subtle strategies employed to make the colonised people accept their subjugated position as something natural and transcendental. They bring out the functioning of power politics that explains the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised even after the end of political imperialism. This phenomenon has been fictionalised by various writers. The postcolonial critics analyse and expose the way in which the colonialists propagated the reality which is constructed by different societies and cultures. Critic Peter Barry, in the book *Beginning Theory*, states, "The first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past and the second step is to erode the colonialist ideology by which the past has been devalued" (186). Most Indian Writings in English can be divided into two categories as pre-Rushdian and post-Rushdian. The concept of nation and history of the nation has acquired focus with the dawn of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie brings out the atrocities by the British army under the leadership of Brigadier Dyer. "As Brigadier Dyer issues a command. More and more people seem to have stumbled and fallen, it will not fade until after his death, years later, on the hill of Sankara Acharya or Takht-e-Sulaiman"(41). By portraying the above said atrocities, Rushdie shows his contempt for imperialism and its consequence, violence and prejudice. For him, one of the ways of promoting empathy and understanding is through the act of describing the stories about human suffering.

In the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre episode Rushdie documents the authoritarian attitude and the oppressive nature of the socially and politically powerful establishments on the helpless individuals. Having lived in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Rushdie has a rich experience of colonisation and its subsequent repercussions. Rushdie creates a piece of virtual life which is significant in the colonised point of view. In the novel Rushdie says "Commander Sabarmati was only a puppet; I was the puppet-master, and the nation performed my play, a lesson to all unfaithful wives and mothers, but not that, never, no" (363-64).

Rushdie explicates the riot in India caused by the disappearance of the relic of the holy hair of Prophet Mohammed. Incensed by the death of his son Hanif, Aadam Aziz leaves his Agra abode never to return. Saleem Sinai, the narrator states that a man answering his grandfather's description has been seen at the Hazratbal Mosque where the concerned relic has been housed. He wonders if his grandfather is behind the theft of the relic. It is stated in the novel: "Was this bizarre incident truly political, or was it the penultimate attempt at revenge upon God by a father who had lost his son?" (385-86). Aadam Aziz suffers a fall and dies in the valley of his birth. The narrator goes on to associate the death of his grandfather with the death of Jawaharlal Nehru on 27th May 1964.

The Indo-Chinese conflict of 1962 finds the Sinais returning to India for a short while. Saleem Sinai realises that he is unable to participate in the midnight's children's conference which collapses because of the war. Rushdie reveals the children born in the midnight of independence are "fathered by history." In 1963, the Sinai family immigrates to Pakistan permanently. It is during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 that Saleem loses most of his family. After that he is convinced by the hidden agenda of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. The novel's history conveys that Pakistan troops enter into the ceasefire line in Kashmir and the people suffer on account of the migration. Critics like Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffith in the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* rightly observe: "These writers also work to reclaim the past, because their own histories were often erased or discredited under imperialism, and to understand their own culture and personal identities and chart their own futures, on their own terms rather than the terms superimposed on them by imperialist ideology and practice." (151)

In Delhi, Prime Minister Shastri announces a massive infiltration to subvert the state. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's foreign minister wants to possess the perfect valley. "Ever since Partition, the Rann had been disrupted territory, the Pakistan Government had built a string of

border posts” (465). Saleem amalgamates the factual media coverage with the incident in his own family as he depicts the course of the Indo-Chinese war. His family members ultimately die in the air raids and he is rendered amnesiac. “Pressures of the internal political troubles in Pakistan – Ayub’s government was tottering, and a war works wonders. The war happened is to separate” (470). Rushdie repudiates violence in all its forms and as a humanist affirms freedom of ideas and beliefs. As a matter of fact, historical sense and reality enter into the documentary framework of Rushdie.

After Sheikh Mujibur-Rehman proclaims the state of Bangladesh on 25th March 1971, he is sniffed out by Saleem Sinai, arrested, and repatriated to West Pakistan. While on this mission, Saleem Sinai escapes from the war into the Sunderbans with three young soldiers and they ultimately emerge in Dacca following a series of misadventures. It is here that one of the children of midnight, Parvati, the witch, who is part of the entertainment troupe is flown in from Delhi to celebrate the victory of the invading army. Parvati greets Saleem Sinai by name and restores to him his identity. She enables him to escape in her wicker basket and they fly to Delhi. In the jungle of Sundarbans the victims with their pain-filled voices say, “Our Golden Bengal – O Mother, I am poor, but what little I have, I lay at thy feet. And it maddens my heart with delight” (510). The people are unable to escape from the tortures of the unceasing voices, and they also face the burden of shame.

Rushdie focuses on the misery and displacement caused by the Indo-Bangladesh war. On account of forced displacement, Saleem Sinai becomes a refugee for a period of time. Subsequently, he is deprived of his livelihood. Rushdie is of the view that displacement of people renders them homeless. The geographical shift undergone by Saleem Sinai speaks about the loss of one’s home as a result of war. The novel states that, “The day of November 20th was a terrible day; the night was a terrible night six days earlier, on Nehru’s seventy third birthday, the great confrontation with the Chinese forces had begun” (419). People are afraid of the gun and it is announced in the newspaper that the public morale drains away. So Indo-Chinese war becomes a fateful thing for Indians.

Apart from the atrocities of the colonisation of the Britishers, Rushdie brings into the forefront the result of the power of hegemony in post independence era through the character of Major Shiva. He returns from Bangladesh as a war hero, and his reappearance disturbs Saleem’s world. Major Shiva is notorious for his affairs with women of various stations and classes. Once they are impregnated, he loses interest and forsakes them. Parvati is not spared of this fate. Shiva abandons her after she gets pregnant. “Major Shiva, lost in the haunted pools of her eyes, aroused beyond endurance by the erotic protrusion of her lips, devoted him for four whole months. Parvati, kneeling at his feet, and told him that she was going to have his child” (575). Major Shiva misuses his power so that the poor women suffer.

Rushdie rejects the idea of the power of hegemony that prevailed during Emergency in the regime of Indira Gandhi. He ardently attacks the notion of Emergency as follows:

Mother of the nation had a coiffure of uniform pigment, the Emergency she spawned might easily have leaked a darker side. But she had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part – public, visible, documented, a matter for historians – and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us. (588)

The novel *Midnight’s Children* has encountered much controversy in India because of its unflattering portrait of Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, who have been involved in a controversial sterilization campaign. Rushdie finds himself rendered impotent towards the close of the story, due to the vasectomy drive under Sanjay Gandhi’s leadership. Men of sixty or seventy years are forcibly taken for sterilization. This was India’s period of dark history. Sujatha, in the book *Re-Presentation of India in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children and Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines* says, “Written in an exuberant style, the comic allegory of Indian history revolves around the lives of the narrator Saleem Sinai and the thousand children born after the Declaration of Independence” (41). The work took its title from Nehru’s speech delivered at the stroke of midnight, 14 August 1947, as India gained its independence from the British.

The twenty one months period from June 25, 1975 to March 21, 1977 was one of uncertainty owing to the imposition of the internal Emergency by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. With reference to the election of 1977, the novel says that Indira Gandhi’s Congress Party suffers a defeat, conceding leadership to the Janata Party. Saleem Sinai however, is not very optimistic about the new government and the existing leader of the party. The novel seems to end on an austere and dismal note of the future.

The cracks and fissures that plague Saleem’s body are a comment on the national corpus afflicted by communal and other divisions. The hope of a new nation is lauded in the birth of Saleem. Rushdie laments the damage to that initial hope by the various historical and political processes that culminate in the Emergency. Through his fictional biography *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie drives home the point of view of individual narration of the history of the nation. Moreover, he deals with the pre and post independence era and the history and politics, which influence the formation of nationhood.

Rushdie examines the various aspects of the colonial past of India and also foregrounds the events that have taken place in India at the time of independence. His ideas about the society regarding India and his concern for the dignity of man in both national and transnational contexts are clearly revealed. The partition of India has also twisted the sense of moral value for men. Saleem Sinai says “Politics, the best of times a bad dirty business” (608). Rushdie determines the total abuse of power by political personalities who only know how to plan their political expediency than the welfare of the masses. Rushdie highlights the revisiting of the past and bring out the conflicts in the subcontinent are the result of political hierarchy, thus bringing into limelight the colonial atrocities that changed the history of the subcontinent

Works Cited

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