

# A Postcolonial Analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*

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## Abstract:

Salman Rushdie is an Indian-born British writer whose works combining magical realism with historical fiction, is primarily concerned with the many connections, disruptions, and migrations between Eastern and Western civilizations, with much of his fiction being set on the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, V.S. Naipaul is a Trinidadian writer of Indian descent known for his pessimistic novels set in developing countries. Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writings that reacts to the discourse of colonization. Post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. The present study attempts to apply a postcolonial approach to V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Both these novels draw the reader's attention to various traits of Postcolonial literature such as appropriation of colonial languages, colonialism, hybridity, decolonization struggles and many more.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Decolonization, Creolisation, Identity, Other.

The past couple of decades have seen the publication of a vast number of cultural critiques of empire and its aftermath under the term 'postcolonial'. Despite their many disparities of perspective and subject-matter, what the critical texts and studies which make up this body of discourse share, is a single common reference point. They are all broadly concerned with experiences of exclusion, subjugation, and resistance under systems of colonial control. Thus, the term Postcolonialism addresses itself to the historical, political, cultural, and textual ramifications of the colonial encounter between the West and the non-West, dating from the sixteenth century to the present day. In accordance with it, Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writings that reacts to the discourse of colonization. Post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. It is the critical analysis of history, culture, literature and the modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, France, Spain, and other European imperial Powers. Postcolonial literature has focused specially on the Third World countries. It is also a literary critique to texts that carry racist or colonial undertones. Postcolonial literature, finally in its most recent form, also attempts to critique the contemporary postcolonial discourse that has been shaped over recent times. Speaking about postcolonial writers V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee, Arundhati Roy, Chinua Achebe, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak are prominent names.

The present study attempts to apply a postcolonial approach to V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Both these novels draw the reader's attention to various traits of Postcolonial literature such as appropriation of colonial languages, colonialism, hybridity, decolonization struggles and many more. *Midnight's Children* is an allegory on the events that occurred since India gained independence. Several controversial issues are discussed in the novel, as it describes the life story of Salim Sinai and the experiences Salim had in a post-colonial independent India and shows the hidden fear of indigenous Indians as a result of the colonial period which was full of slavery, poverty and deceit. On the other hand, *A House for Mr Biswas* has been canonized, as Harish Trivedi says, "as one of the greatest postcolonial novels in English". (Trivedi 3). This novel portrays the life of people of other nations immigrating to a creole society. In this novel by Naipaul, the writer draws our attention to the characters who are immigrant Indian people spending their lives in the creole society of Trinidad under the dominance of colonial power.

One of the primary features of Postcolonial literature is the appropriation of colonial languages. Most of them try to take the language of the colonizer and to narrate. However, there is a conflict of opinion regarding this as for writers like Chinua Achebe using colonizers language to tell African stories is seen as an enabling practice but for scholars like Chinweizu and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o believe that using native languages and cultural vocabularies is absolutely crucial to developing a native cultural sphere that is free of the ideological determinisms of the colonial system of education and colonial ideological imperatives. However, most of the postcolonial critics and writers prefers the use the language of their colonial masters to narrate and in this regard both Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul writes their novels *Midnight's Children* and *A House for Mr Biswas* respectively in English, the language of the colonizers.

Homi K. Bhaba in his *The Location of Culture* (1994) concentrates on the interaction of cultures and looks at the ways that two cultures merge into each other. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* can also be analysed as a postcolonial text in line with Bhaba's theories. Bhabha by the help of some terms such as mimicry, stereotype, ambivalence, unhomeliness argues that the identity of both colonizer and the colonized is changed during their encounter. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a tragicomic novel set in Trinidad in 1950s. It deals with an East Indian's struggle for a place to settle his identity. The novel takes its subject matter from the excluded peoples who have been alienated from societies to which they apparently belong, and who are in search of an identity. More importantly, the novel is considered as a dedication to Naipaul's father, depicting his father's misfortunes in the creole society of Trinidad. As Rob Nixon explains: "nothing since has equalled the inventiveness and emotional generosity of that

homage to his father's misfortunes in the straitened circumstances of colonial Trinidad" (Nixon 14). The story tells us how as the generation changes, the cultural identity of the Indian people living in the creole society of Trinidad changes too as a result of the interaction they have with one another or with the colonizer's culture. With the process of creolisation, the colonized, in order to attain identity undergo serious psychological, spiritual, and educational changes. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the story and history of three generations of Indian people living in the Creole society of Trinidad. The three generations in the novel are viewed through the eyes of Mr. Biswas who is the protagonist of the novel. During this encounter, as the generations are passing before our eyes, we, as readers of the novel, become aware of the cultural changes in the rituals of the Indian people of the novel as a result of which their identity and beliefs undergo drastic changes. One of this significant change is the language. As the story goes on, we see how the native language of the people changes and is replaced by the language of the colonizer. The culture Mr. Biswas was born to speaks Hindi but as the time goes on because they are living in a creole society of mixed cultures, they begin to use English instead of Hindi in public. Tara, Mr. Biswas's aunt, speaks in English with the photographer in his father's funeral as English is becoming the prevalent English in Trinidad. It shows how the dominant culture is influential in shaping one's identity and culture that they begin to use the colonizer's language in public.

Another important thing, which happens during the generation's change, is the culture affecting the identity of people living in the Creole society. The cultural change can be observed in Tara's speech as she says, "Fashions are changing all the time these days. I am just old fashioned, that is all." (Naipaul 15). She represents the first-generation Indians strictly following the cultures and traditions but as we come across the next generations the cultures are gradually changing. The first generation of these migrants with representatives such as Mrs Tulsi, Seth, Mr. Biswas's aunt Tara and her husband Ajodha strictly follow the rules and customs. As a case in point, when Ajodhya's brother, Bhandat who has a mistress of another race is deprived of his helps and banished to loneliness as Tara has sworn not to mention his name again. Unlike their parents, the second generation does not believe in these rules anymore, as it happens for Ajodhya's nephews and Mr. Biswas's sister that neglect them.

Along with the cultural changes that happen in the island, we see drastic changes in the education of the people in the three generations of the Indian people living in Trinidad. We see how this change in the encounter each generation has with education makes people's identity change too. During the course of the novel, we see how from the first generation to the third, their views towards the education change. As mentioned, the first generation believes more on superstitions and even when Biswas goes to school, he does not believe in the lessons he should learn. He thinks they are useless. At school, he learns both English and Hindi but in the next generation, it is the English language that is dominant and they forget even how to speak Hindi as the native language of their ancestors. Hindu people living in Trinidad are very religious people sticking hard to their religious views. Similar to the other cultural changes that take place in the various generations, we face, during the course of the novel that religious view also changes as the generation changes. As an example, the daily puja is done at Hanuman House as a tribute to the gods and everything, even the name of the house is a reminiscence of old India. However, this religious view fades as each generation emerges with their new mode of thought regarding religion. As Imraan Coovadia asserts: "The novel sketches divisions between traditionalists and adherents of Reform Hinduism" (Coovadia 110).

This shows how their cultures got hybridised as stated by Bhabha. In the writings of Bhabha, depicted best in *The Location of Culture*, he concentrates on the interaction of cultures and looks at the ways that two cultures merge into each other. In the novel Naipaul also tries to show how the cultures got hybridised in a Postcolonial era.

Similarly, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a key text in postcolonial literature describing an allegory of events since India's independence. The novel depicts the historic events which shaped the life of Postcolonial India that we know today through the portrayal of personal history of Sinai family. *Midnight's Children* follows Saleem Sinai, the novel's narrator, as he self-consciously explains his family history to the reader and to his listener, Padma. While describing his grandfather and grandmother's personal history, Saleem intertwines Indian history within his narrative. This combination of his own familial history and Indian history culminates in the moment of his birth. Born at precisely midnight, August 15, 1947, Saleem echoes the birth of an independent India, which gained its independence from Great Britain at the same exact moment as Saleem's birth. In this moment, Saleem gains the ability to communicate with the other "midnight children," those also born on the same day as Indian independence. The novel aligns Saleem's narrative to the narrative of a newly independent India, creating an allegorical reading of his character.

Post-colonial identity is the way a person or group of people affected by colonization. Characteristics of post-colonial identity include being dehumanised, marginalised, voiceless, hybrid, and being classed as 'other' or 'subaltern'. Rushdie tries to show how the colonised people were inhumanly dehumanised by the colonizers in the text with the extensive use of metaphors. In one instance Salim said he was "mysteriously handcuffed to history". (Rushdie 210). This infers that Salim experienced a feeling that he was a slave to his life and his decisions were not his to make, his interests were forced, and he had no control whatsoever over his life. This signifies dehumanization, as the colonizers brainwashed the indigenous inhabitants of the subject country, convincing them that their native culture and standards were inferior and animal-like. Salim also talks about the insults that he had to endure throughout his life. He was called 'Piece-of-the-moon' which is a metaphor that originates from Arabic, where it directly translates to 'baby gazelle'. This is an example of dehumanization, as the people using this to insult Salim because of his skin colour, comparing him to an exotic and wild animal, showing that they believe he does not qualify to be a human.

Secondly, Rushdie presents the colonized people as 'voiceless'. An example of this is when Salim reveals that he doesn't have the power to open up about his experiences as he had been a 'swallow of lives'. This signifies that he has bottled up all of his and other people's experiences and their inevitable destiny and purpose inside because he had no power and his opinion would not matter even if he had voiced his thoughts. Another example of this is when he expresses that his destinies were 'indissolubly chained to those of my country'. This can imply that he was psychologically as well as physically being forced to follow the crowd and to not be out of the ordinary.

Hybridity is another key feature of Postcolonialism. In simple terms hybridity refers to any mixing of east and western culture. Within colonial and postcolonial literature, it most commonly refers to colonial subjects of the colonized countries who have found a balance between eastern and western cultural attributes. Hybridity is illustrated throughout the novel through the vast

variety of contrasting characters. The cultural division of hybridity is shown through Saleem's relationship with other characters such as Shiva. Their relationship seems complicated and a little bit conflicted because of the plethora of differences between them, such as birthplace, religion, and family, economic and social status. This demonstrates the criticism hybrid people would have received in the post-colonial and independent era of India, as families which had become mixed with an English person's family were considered higher than their original indigenous counterparts, and so may have been called traitors or weak for mixing their blood with people who had taken everything the country had that was unique. Saleem's wrongly perceived parents specially his father Ahmed Sinai was a shrewd businessman and a wealthy gentleman and he is the perfect specimen of a hybridised individual. Moreover, there remains a cultural, social and economic division or difference between the hybridised individuals and non-hybridised individuals. This is clearly highlighted through Saleem's relation with Siva which remains complicated because of their nature of birth.

The protagonist of the novel Saleem Sinai also becomes a face of Postcolonial India. The novel is narrated through the first person, is the history of an individual, who identifies himself with the history of the nation. The hero, Saleem Sinai, the child of the midnight, is born at a time when the past and the future join hands in respectful greetings on 15 August, 1947 when the nation he was born in, India gains Independence. Consciously and unconsciously, he becomes mysteriously hand-cuffed to the happenings of the nation and his destiny is indissolubly chained to his nation. It so happens that on the same night between 12 p.m. and 1 a.m. with a slight difference in time, 1001 children are born throughout India. Of the 1001 children born, 420 children die and the remaining 581 children survive. These children are gifted with an extraordinary skill of telepathy. This gift enables them to organise a Midnight's Children's Conference, which is a platform for the children to meet and discuss their personal and political problems through their minds. The 581 number of children and the Midnight's Children's Conference is somewhat parallel to the Indian Parliament and its members. The protagonist's life's major events are found parallel to many political and historical events in the country. Saleem says "Such historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world". (Rushdie 1). The major historical events described in the novel are: The Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre, the Quit India Movement, the role of Muslim League in the Partition, the partition of India, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, re-organisation of States on linguistic basis in 1956, the language riots, the Chinese aggression, Prime minister Nehru's death in 1964, the Indo-Pak war of 1965, the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, the declaration of Emergency in 1975, and the General Election of 1977. Thus, the protagonist of the novel and his narration becomes a face of Postcolonial India.

To conclude, it can thus be said that, both V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* draws the reader's attention to various traits of Postcolonial literature. Naipaul focuses on East Indian's Struggle for an identity in Trinidad through the protagonist Mr. Biswas around whom the whole story runs. On the other hand, the protagonist of the novel Saleem Sinai also becomes a face of Postcolonial India. The novel depicts the historic events which shaped the life of Postcolonial India that we know today through the portrayal of personal history of Sinai family. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a cornerstone of postcolonial literature. The novel clearly illustrates these important ideas of postcoloniality, the creation and telling of history, identity, and storytelling. While the novel discusses these important and significant themes, it becomes necessary to discuss the problems associated with formulating and creating a postcolonial identity and history. The novel illustrates the problems of postcoloniality, the difficulties in assigning an origin point, determining one's own history, and finding an authentic identity. While Naipaul in his *A House for Mr. Biswas* portrays the life of people of other nations immigrating to a creole society. In this novel by Naipaul, the writer draws our attention to the characters who are immigrant Indian people spending their lives in the creole society of Trinidad under the dominance of colonial power.

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