



Changing Identity in Salman Rushdi's Novel Midnight's Children

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ABSTRACT

This novel of Salman Rushdi is a harsh criticism of the gender related power struggler of post colonial Indian society. Saleem Senai, The Protagonist born at exactly midnight on the eve of India's independence from British Colonialism. Using their considerable power and influence the Britishers imposed their western culture and influence onto the Indians. In Midnight Children several of Rushdie's characters faces a crisis of identity and an a larger scale national identity is a multifaced' one.

In this paper, I have tried to explore the facts which are responsible for the changing identities, during the division of of India and Pakistan. I will concentrate on the facts which happens in the life of the hero and the consequences which led him towards a diverted path. I will discuss in this paper that separation of any country, can destroy a man's life since birth to death.

Keywords :- India, Struggle, Changing, Identity, Colonialism, Division, Telepathy.

LIFE STREAM OF SALEEM SENAI AND

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Harold bloom describes the novel in the following manner : “Midnight’s Childrens is an Ironic, quirky, but deadly serious critique of quiescence of withdrawal of forgetting”

In this novel Saleem Senai, the protagonist and narrator of Midnight’s Children, narrates and opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15, 1947. Saleem’s story begins in, Kashmir, thirty two years before his birth in 1985. Saleem’s grandfather, a doctor begins treating Naseem, the woman who becomes Saleem’s grandmother. Afterwards they marry Aadam & Naseem have three daughters named - Alia, Mumtaz and Emerald and two sons Mustafa & Hanif. Aadam becomes the follower of optimistic activist Mian Abdullah. After the assassination of Abdullah, Aadam hides his assistant, Nadir Khan in the basement of his house inspite of unwillingness of his wife, where Nadir falls in love with Mumtaz and they secretly marry. But Nadir Khan is sent running for saving his life. When Mumtaz is abandoned by the husband she agrees to marry Ahmed Senai, a young merchant Mumtaz Changes her name to Amina and moves to Delhi with her new husband pregnant. After a terrorist organization burns down Ahmed’s factory, Ahmed and Amina move to Bombay. They purchase a house from a Britisher who is departing. We Willyewinkie, a poor man who looks after the family of Methwold’s. Estate, says that his wife, Vanita is also expecting child soon. Vanita had an affair with Methwold and he is the true father of her unborn child Amina and Vanita both go into the labor and exactly at midnight each woman delivers a son but unfortunately their name tags are switched, thereby giving the poor baby a life of privilege. This is done by Joseph D’costa’s influence but driven by a sense of guilt after words, She becomes an Ayaah or Nanny to Saleem. Because it occurs at the exact moment, India gets its independence. The press heralds Saleem’s birth as he heuely significant. He is nicknamed Brass Monkey by his mischievous sister, due to having a large nose.

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 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”¹. The children are embodiment of the country, of the nation, of its present and its future. Owing to his own 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 partallel history of oppression and intolerance.”²

India had every 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”³. 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 Willie 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 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, "Abra ca dabra", 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 of tremendous promise, or was it rather the vehicle of the children's eventual undoing? Was Saleem, as its founder, their savior 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 country, 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."⁴ Considering the fact the 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.

Saleem Senai as the symbol of British Colonialism and Post Colonialism

This is a loose allegory for events in 1947. British Raj India and after the partition of India. Saleem Senai is born with telepathic powers as well as an enormous nose with an extremely sensitive sense of smell. This novel is divided into three books – the first book begins with the story of Senai's family particularly with events leading up to the fall of British Colonial India and the partition. Saleem, using his telepathic powers assembles a midnight children conference reflective of the issues India faced in its early statehood concerning the cultural, linguistic, religious and political differences faced by a vastly diverse nation.

British Colonialism is also reflected in Rushdie's representation of the other within midnight's children. The other – generally accepted within the postcolonial milieu as the West tendency to view anyone or anything not white, Christian, or European as savage and uncivilized- is present in a myriad of ways throughout most of Rushdie's novel. The post colonial India of Rushdie's Midnight's children underscores the difficulties of navigating a cultural existence that has been largely erased and permanently when Saleem's parents, Ahmed and Amina Sinai buy William Methwold's mansion, the strange purchase agreement is a small – scale representation of British Colonialism.

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"⁵

CONCLUSION

Midnight's Children is Rushdie's attempt to balance the secular and the religious in post colonial India and while Saleem's story does not inspire much optimism regarding religious peace, Rushdie does not offer some hope. Knowledge is essential to religious tolerance and, Mid night's Children is certainly an education for the people who don't believe in it. Rushdie himself explains the ideals that Mid Night's Children celebrate :

"My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity : ideas to which the ideologies of the communalist are diametrically opposed the defining image of India is the crowd and a crowd is by its very nature super abundant, heterogeneous, many things at once."⁶

I can say that Rushdie's novel can be observed not only through India, but globally, through the whole world when he is cherishing for reinventing the world and the subject of human identity with his characters although there is (in his novel), the clash of civilizations, increasing gap between cultures, and the proliferation of fundamentalism.

Harold Bloom says about Midnights children :-

"Reading Midnight's children, I do not find it dated, neither do I read it merely as elegy / eology 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 supersede it in style."⁷

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