

Empowered Women: the Representation of Female Characters in *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, received extensive critical approbation, together with that year's Booker prize, and launched its author's deeply triumphant literary career. The novel was also awarded the Booker McConnell Prize for fiction in 1981. The novel portrays the transition of the country from British colonial rule and the partition of the country. The novel is combines magical realism, post-colonialism and postmodernism. It is a historical account of modern India focusing on the inextricably linked fates of two children, Saleem Sinai and Shiva. They are born at the midnight on 15th August, 1947 when India got independence.

The novel depicts a pitiable picture of men where the women are their tormentors, unmakers, and controllers. Naseem Aziz, Amina Sinai, Parvati-the-witch, Jamila Singer, Mary Pereira and the Widow are all endowed with dangerous powers. They are trapped in a binary dualism of good and bad. The novel depicts that both a devil and an angel are lurking in a female character. Their portrayal offers positivity, yet incorporates negativity as well. In order to explore the crucial link between their apparent 'nurturer or destroyer dichotomy' the paper will analyze how these women characters are invested with power.

Keyword: women, female, power, dichotomy, positivity, trapped.

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, received extensive critical approbation, together with that year's Booker prize, and launched its author's deeply triumphant literary career. The novel depicts a pitiable picture of men where the women are their tormentors, unmakers, and controllers. Naseem Aziz, Amina Sinai, Parvati-the-witch, Jamila Singer, Mary Pereira and the Widow are all endowed with dangerous powers. They are trapped in a binary dualism of good and bad. The novel depicts that both a devil and an angel are lurking in a female character. Their portrayal offers positivity, yet incorporates negativity as well. In order to explore the crucial link between their apparent 'nurturer or destroyer dichotomy' the paper will analyze how these women characters are invested with power.

In the novel, Saleem Sinai, the narrator-protagonist claims that women have always been the ones to change his life. He says that women have made him and also unmade him. Women are the makers at the same time unmakers of Saleem Sinai. The female characters in the novel

are assigned with a chief function of framing the protagonist's identity. Saleem, in the novel, invokes the divine symbol of women's power, "Shakti". It is the symbol of powerful female sexuality which can also be understood as a source of inspiration and strength. Saleem perceives them as a powerful cosmic force which makes their portrayal as a collective entity, with both mothering and monstrous qualities possible.

The Reverend Mother

One of the major female characters in the novel "Midnight's Children" is Naseem Aziz, the Reverend Mother. She is representative of traditional East. Her upbringing is extremely orthodox. She is hidden away in the house guarded by women. Her husband is chosen by her father. She is given in marriage in a traditional style. The novel portrays her all the time resisting her husband, Aadam Aziz, which is against the conception of Indian women as a submissive member of the society. On their second night of marriage, when Aadam Aziz asks her 'to move a little' during sex, she refuses on the grounds of it being a corrupting westernized practice or worse. She shrieks in horror and says, "'My God', what have I married? I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls be like them! Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any... bad word woman" (Rushdie 38).

She emerges as the stronger partner in her marital life, defying her husband's desire by becoming fat and refusing to do his sexual bidding. She even criticizes Aadam for his Europe returned ideas and vehemently opposes coming out of purdah. Aadam tells her, "Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (39). According to the Islamic tradition, the veil is considered as a tool of female empowerment as it serves as a protective shield granting women security from men's sexual advances. Her religious faith does not allow her to leave her Muslim identity. She asserts, in opposition to her husband's modern views: "You want me to walk naked in front of strange men" (38).

Her rebellious attitude further gets reflected when she refuses to pose for a life-size blow-up photograph of the family to hang on the living-room walls. When her turn to pose came she seizes the photographer's camera and broke it over his skull. She does not want her shamelessness to be recorded and thus remains stuck to her tradition. There are no photographs of her (my grandmother) anywhere on the earth. She is the assertion of tradition that is rigid, uncompromising and vehement. It is through her veil that she suppresses her husband and does not get oppressed by him. Though she gives up her veil by refusing to pose for a photograph, she maintains her identity and dignity.

Naseem Aziz exercises a tight control over household affairs. According to Sarah Upstone, the domestic space in the novel is 'a site of power contestation'. Naseem takes full possession of this realm which in Indian tradition belongs to the male member of their family. She uses her domestic realm to grow into a powerful, ruthless matriarch. And at the dinner-table, imperiously, she continued to rule. No food was set upon the table, no plates were laid. Curry and crockery were marshalled upon a low side-table by her right hand, and Aziz and the children ate what she dished out. It is a sign of the power of this custom that, even when her husband was afflicted by constipation, she never once permitted him to choose his food, and listened to no requests or words of advice (49).

She insists on the traditional Islamic education for her children who were supposed to be good Muslims and learn the teachings of the Quran. When Aadam fires the religious tutor she

gets so angry that she even curses him. “Man without dignity!...Man without, whatsitsname, shame!” (50). She does not appreciate religious tolerance in her domestic sphere and starves her husband almost to death, refusing to fulfill her female nurturing role. She says, “I swear no food will come from my kitchen to your lips! No, not one chapati, until you bring the maulvi sahib back and kiss his, whatsitsname, feet!”(51).

Reverend Mother is a strong authoritative woman. She is a tough matriarch, often trying to impose her will. There was no one to oppose her. When Ahmed ranted at Amina for hours after Mary’s revelations had unleashed, Reverend Mother intervened to resolve their marital dispute. She stood for her daughter and says that it is no shame to leave an inadequate husband. She advises her, “Go from him; go today, and take your children, whatsitsname, away from their oaths which he spews from his lips like an animal, whatsitsname, of the gutter” (393). According to the social and patriarchal construction of Indian culture, the identity of a woman depends upon her husband but Reverend Mother’s advice to Amina to walk away from this patriarchal construction itself can be seen as empowerment.

She is described as the destroyer of her hapless husband’s life, as her “strength of will seemed to increase as Aziz was ground down by age” (111). She never mentions Aadam Aziz, nor would she grieve over him. This also shows how strong she was as a woman who never thought of her better-half with whom she had spent most of her days. “Moustachioed, matriarchal, proud: Naseen Aziz had found her way of coping with tragedy” (456).

Mumtaz

Mumtaz was never brilliant; not as beautiful as Emerald; but she was good, and dutiful, and alone. She loved children. She falls in love with Nadir Khan, marries him and leads a double life. Nadir Khan was an impotent man but she tried to fulfill him through her love. She even stands for her love and argues with her mother. She says that she loved her husband and that is the most important thing for her. He was a good man and she would possibly find a way to have children also.

Amina Sinai

When a Hindu revivalist group, the Ravana gang terrorizes Muslims, and the Muslim crowd turns on the lone Hindu Lifafa Das. Amina saves Lifafa Das from the mob by making a public announcement. She shouts, “Listen well’, I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!” (100). She strongly asserts herself and saves Lifafa Das from the mob.

Despite being married to Ahmed Sinai, she is never able to forget her first husband, Nadir Khan. She cannot suppress her love for Nadir Khan and therefore she goes against the institution of marriage. “My mother turned scarlet; politics and emotions were united in her cheeks... through the dirty, square, glassy cinema-screen of the Pioneer Gate’s window, I watched Amina Sinai and the no-longer-Nadir play out their love scene; they performed with the ineptitude of

genuine amateurs” (300).

Ahmed Sinai is not a happy man. He is aware of his future failure. He stays at home and lurks in a ruin, awaiting demons. When his assets get frozen by the government he feels completely dejected and descends into alcoholism and isolation. Amina goes out to earn for her family and saves her family from starvation. She leads her family to financial stability. She carries her duty as a nurturer; moreover she does what a man should do. She fulfills the role that is traditionally set aside for the men to fulfill. She is the backbone of her family and in reality she has the power. She uses her money in race course. “The streak of luck of my mother at the race-track was so long, a seam so rich, that if it hadn't happened it wouldn't have been credible... for month after month, she put her money on a jockey's nice tidy hair-style or a horse's pretty piebald colouring; and she never left the track without a large envelope stuffed with notes” (192).

Parvati-the-witch

Parvati-the-witch is born in an Old Delhi slum. She has the power of magic. She has been “given the powers of the true adept, the illuminates, the genuine gifts of conjuration and sorcery, the art which required no artifice” (277). She is protective, tender and powerful; a kind of mother goddess, the source of new hope; yet not beautiful. Through her magical power she hides Saleem inside her wicker basket, saves him from the clutches of enemy and conveys him safely back to India. She makes him climb into ‘the basket of invisibility’. It is through the basket of Parvati-the-Witch that Saleem gets a new life and his lost identity back. She uses her power to get a son by Shiva because Saleem ‘can't have children’. Parvati casts her spell and brings Shiva to the ghetto. “One night, she extracted from her shabby garments a lock of hair, and began to speak sonorous words...the Hook of Indra in her right hand, and a lock of hair in her left, she summoned him to her. Parvati called Shiva; believe don't believe, but Shiva came” (568). In the case of Parvati, Catherine Cundy remarks that “Women is prepared to aid man's escape and secure his safety, but through the exercise of her power and ultimate control...Parvati's power is illustrative of the nurturer/destroyer dichotomy that Rushdie so often depicts in women” (Cundy 13). But in the novel Parvati is indubitably depicted more than a nurturer or a destroyer. She decides her own fate, compels Shiva to come, gets pregnant, releases him from her spell and gets married to the man she had wanted to marry.

Other Characters

Uma Parameswaran argues that “the central issue” in all Rushdie's novel is ‘the dichotomy of good and evil in oneself and the world’. In the novel evil appear clear and unalloyed as in the case of the Widow. She is destructive, her hand yet lethal. The Brass Monkey repels love, yet is no Islamic fundamentalist: she finally seeks virginal sanctuary in a convent. Padma is protective, tough, vigorous, loving, powerful but not beautiful. Evie Burns is seductive or destructive. The Narlikar women are tough financiers and yet powerful. The ayah, Mary Pereira, is the nurturer of Saleem's creative or chutnifying power and his fate in that it is she who switches the babies.

Conclusion

Catherine Cundy observes that “women in (Rushdie's novels) are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequalities, and then effectively demeaned... or marginalized by

the writing itself" (17). Rushdie's depiction of women is considered problematic but in the novel, the preponderance of women, powerful yet exerting a certain attraction, suggests the altered view of women in *Midnight's Children*. The representation of multifariously empowered women capable of nurturing as well as destroying, troubles the unwieldy question of domination, of power. For in the novel power does not accrue straightforwardly to the men, instead power does accrue to the women.

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