

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: A Postcolonial Study

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Abstract:

Colonialism not only extracted tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered, it restructured the economics of the latter, so that there was flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries. Both the colonized and the colonizers moved; the former, not only as slaves, but also as indentured, labourers, domestic servants, travelers and traders, and the colonial masters as administrators, soldiers, merchants, settlers, travelers, writers, teachers and scientists. Although European colonialism involved a variety of techniques and patterns of domination, penetrating deep into some societies and involving a more comparatively superficial contact with others, all of them produced the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry.

*The consequent Postcolonial fictions have explored the characteristics of colonial power and the ways in which this power constructs the authoritative figures. In *Midnight's Children*, the British rule is described and analysed from the Indian perspective as oppressive, exploitative and unjust. The present paper aims at reflecting the growing feeling of resentment against British rule as well as the growing courage to speak out against exploitation and injustice under the scanner of Postcolonial theory. It also explores how the repressive measures of colonial government had influenced the lives and manners of common masses and their evoked responses. It also analyses how Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* chronologically entwines characters from India's cultural history with characters from Western culture, making *Midnight's Children* an amalgamation of eastern content and western form to achieve the near ideal of a 'hybrid postcolonial text'.*

Key Words: *Postcolonialism, colonialism, subjugation, injustice, culture.*

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The world colonialism comes from 'colonial', which meant 'farm' or 'settlement' and is referred to the Romance who settled in other lands but still retained their citizenship. The definition certainly avoids any reference to the people other than the colonizers, the people who might already been living in those places where colonies were established. So, colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods. But colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa, or the Americas from the 16th century onwards; it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history. According to Marxist theory, earlier colonialism was pre-capitalist while modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in western Europe. Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered, it restructured the economics of the latter, so that there was flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries. Both the colonized and the colonizers moved; the former, not only as slaves, but also as indentured, labourers, domestic servants, travelers and traders, and the colonial masters as administrators, soldiers, merchants, settlers, travelers, writers, teachers and scientists. The essential point is that although European colonialism involved a variety of techniques and patterns of domination, penetrating deep into some societies and involving a more comparatively superficial contact with others, all of them produced the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry.

Postcolonialism is not just coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly it is the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African- American or the people of Asian and Caribbean origin in Britain as 'Postcolonial' subjects although they live within Metropolitan countries.

Taken literally the term 'postcolonial literature' would seem to label literature written by people living in countries formerly colonized by other nations. This is undoubtedly what the term originally meant, but there is much more with this definition. Literal colonization is not the exclusive objective of post-colonial study. Lenin's Classic analysis of imperialism led to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' which distinguishes between literal political dominance and dominance through ideas and culture. (What many critics of American influence call the 'Coca-Cola Colonization' of the world).

Some scholars argue that the term should denote works written after colonization, not only those created after independence. While the others argue that the term misleadingly implies that colonialism is over when in fact most of the nations involved are still culturally and economically subordinated to the rich industrial states through various forms of neo-colonialism even though they are technically independent. Many 'postcolonial' authors do not share the general orientation of postcolonial scholars towards engaging in an ongoing critique of colonialism. Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe and Wale Soyinka, for instance, after writing powerful indictments of the British in their country, turned to exposing the deeds of native-born dictators and corrupt officials within their independent Homeland.

'Postcolonialism' as a term leads itself to very broad use, Australians and Canadians sometimes claim to live in postcolonial societies, but many would refuse them the label because their literature is dominated by European immigrants and is therefore a literature of privilege rather than of protest. According to the usual postcolonial paradigm only literature written by native people in Canada and Australia would truly qualify. Although, postcolonial theory generally confines itself to the post-half century, it can be argued that everyone has been colonized at some time or other. Five thousand years ago Sumer started the process of uniting formerly independent city states, Narmar similarly subjugated formerly independent upper and lower Egypt, Rushdie points out that England itself is a postcolonial nation, having been conquered by Romans and Normans, among others. In fact, postcolonial theoretician Homi Bhabha developed the term 'hybridity' to capture the sense that many writers have the sentiments of belonging to both the cultures. More and more writers, like Rushdie, reject the older paradigm of 'exile' which was meaningful to earlier generations of emigrants in favour of accepting their blend of cultures as a positive synthesis. This celebration of cultural blending considerably blurs the boundaries laid down by postcolonial theory.

Indian literature in English which is accessible to the West, still has its roots in colonial literature and the tensions between East and West. A European naturalism is often present; a concern to posit India as an arena within which Western readers can identify realities is inherent within much of this writing.

Salman Rushdie has been at the epicenter of cultural storms as individual and artist, the charismatic subject of ongoing debates on postcolonial issues such as race, religion, nation identity, their hybridization, subversion and revision. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is an expression of the author's own childhood, his affection for the city Bombay (now Mumbai) in those times, and the tumultuous variety of the Indian subcontinent. Recognized for its remarkably flexible and innovative use of the English language, with a liberal mix of native Indian languages, this novel represents a departure from conventional Indian English writing. *Midnight's Children* chronologically entwines characters from India's cultural history with characters from Western culture, and the devices that they signify Indian culture, religion and

storytelling. *Midnight's Children* is an amalgamation of eastern content and western form to achieve the near ideal of a 'hybrid postcolonial text'.

The confidence in the superiority of the British race is one of the dominant motifs in colonial British fiction. The English came to be racially characterized as 'brave, forceful, daring, honest, active, masculine and more accurate in the perceptions.' The presence of an elite Anglo-Indian community provided glimpses of English people and their lives to ordinary and uneducated Indians and its insularity allowed these to be extrapolated to ideas of England and Englishness in 'general'. Admiration, revulsions, a sense of alienation and bizarre ideas mark this 'general' response to the English. In *Midnight's Children*, Mr. Methwold, an English man who has been in India for many years is described as, "A six-foot Titan, this Methwold, his face the pink of roses and eternal youth. He had a head of thick black brilliantined hair, parted in the centre- whose ramrod precision made Methwold irresistible to women, who felt unable to prevent themselves wanting to rumple it up." (95)

The English are described as the men with greater aesthetic values and senses which are altogether absent in Indians. Describing Methwold's house which was to be purchased by Aadam Sinai, Rushdie writes:

Methwold's estate, four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents (Conqueror's houses; Roman mansions, three-storey homes of gods standing on a two storey, Olympus, a stunted Kailash) large, durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointily red-tiled hats-houses with verandahs with servants' quarters reached by spiral iron staircases hidden at the back houses which their owner William Methwold had named majestically after the palaces of Europe. (95).

Again, Rushdie did not forget to emphasize the principle of punctuality among the British. "Six o'clock every morning. Cocktail hour. Never varied in twenty years." (95).

The social respectability enjoyed by the English in India compelled Indians to drive most of their ideas from the English through direct or indirect contact. Educated Indians tried to model themselves on their Anglicization. They tried to imitate the English because of their admiration of English literature, language, culture and western scientific progress etc. Postcolonial literature depicts the aping of English manners and superficial adaption of Englishness as the inevitable outcome of colonial subjugation. Salman Rushdie epitomizes through Aadam Sinai, the aspirations of every Indian, educated, or uneducated, to yearn for a white complexion:

(That man is cold in the blood; so now his skin has made ice, while ice like a fridge) I should say, in all honesty, that although he pretended to be worried by his

transformation into a white man, and went to see doctors and so forth, he was secretly rather pleased when they failed to explain the problem or prescribe a cure, because he had long envied Europeans their pigmentation.” (179).

Talking of vulnerability of Indians towards the manners, habits and literature of the English, Rushdie writes, “In India, we have always been vulnerable to Europeans. Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself in India.” (185).

Postcolonial fictions have explored the characteristics of colonial power and the ways in which this power constructs the authoritative figures. In *Midnight's Children*, the British rule is described and analysed from the Indian perspective as oppressive, exploitative and unjust. The present research reflects the growing feeling of resentment against British rule as well as the growing courage to speak out against exploitation and injustice. The repressive measures of colonial government had not only far-reaching and profound impact in the form of hartal or non-cooperation movement from Indian masses but evoked more violent responses.

Salman Rushdie equally depicts the callousness and authoritative attitude of General Dyer who was the perpetrator of Jallianwala massacre. When on 19th April 1919, thousands of Indians were crowding in Amritsar at the designated place for the peaceful protest, “while in the Cantonment area, at British Army headquarter, one Brigadier R.E Dyer is waxing his moustache.” (34)

Considering the peaceful protest of the mob, a rising danger for the Empire, the martial law Commander of Amritsar with his fifty men opened indiscriminate firing:

Brigadier Dyer's fifty men put their machine guns and go away. They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty sounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. “Good shooting”, Dyer tells his men, ‘We have done a jolly good thing’. (36).

See the height of inhumanity of the man of the Empire towards the colonized

The English have an imperial conviction of being “a man of destiny, shaping the lives of the lesser man of the world.” They themselves claim to have a full faith in the generosity of the English race. They pat themselves for making the subjugated civilized and educated. Their efforts to run a well-managed government are lauded by themselves and they take the credit of providing various facilities to the subjugated hiding their ulterior motive of exploitation and plundering of the natural and human resources of the colonized in a ruthless way.

Rushdie depicts Mr. Methwold who optioned to sell his house in Bombay in order to return to England saying, “Hundreds of years of decent government then suddenly, up and off. You’ll admit we weren’t all bad: built your roads, schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling until an Englishman bothered to see it. (96)

The behaviour and attitudes of the British towards Indians has not undergone any change for the better even after more than one century of reign. The experience and language of the colonized were denied and despaired, leaving them marginalized, dispossessed, subjugated within their own land. The colonial discourse represented Indians as inscrutable, wily and unreliable. They are depicted as a thing of dowry and not human beings, as mentioned in *Midnight’s Children* as, “Charles II of England was betrothed to Catherine who would, all her life, play second fiddle to orange-relling Nell. But she has this consolation that it was her marriage dowry which brought Bombay into British hands.” (P 92)

Dr Adam Aziz of *Midnight’s Children* felt embarrassed when he learnt, “India like radium had been discovered by the Europeans; even Oscar was filled with admiration for Vasco da Gama.” (P 11)

The derogation of native religions which was a common feature of colonialist discourse was also countered in *Midnight’s Children*. The British seem to have found Hinduism uniquely repugnant. Even while portraying Nehru, Rushdie writes, “The weary serious man is getting to his feet. Anointed with holy water from the Tanjore River, he rises; his forehead smeared with sanctified ash, he clears his throat. Without written speech in hand. Without having memorized any prepared words, Jawaharlal Nehru begins ...” (116).

Rushdie talks about the five-year plans of India in a derogatory way, “At the same time, Jawaharlal Nehru was consulting astrologers about the country’s Five-Year Plan, in order to avoid another Karamstan.” (158).

The idea of English life as ‘free’ is one that recurs in both fictional and autobiographical narratives across the different time periods. Colonial discourse emphasized Indian women’s lot a tragic and miserable and employed it to provide a rationale for the imperialist “humanistic” project of “rescuing” the Indian women. At the same time, it represented English women as virtuous and refined and English society as an equitable one where women enjoyed freedom and equality to men. Rushdie writes, “Walsingham School for Girls on Nepean Sea Road; a school, full of tall, superbly muscled Europeans, who swam like fish and dived like submarines. In their

spare time, they could be seen from our bedroom window, cavorting in map-shaped pool of Breach candy club.” (184).

Dr Aziz, educated abroad, like Englishman believes in the freedom of woman and made a scathing attack on the dress code of the Indian women when he mentioned, “Your shirt covers you from neck to wrist to knee. Your loose pajamas hide you down to and including your ankles. What we have left are your feet and face. Wife are your face and feet obscene”. (34)

Race, gender and class have had profound effects on postcolonial writers preoccupied with subject identity. The migrated to alien places and were craving for their ‘self-identity’. Nature of ‘place’ and placement, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ ‘west’ and ‘east’, ‘the rigidly binomial opposition of ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’, was persistently disturbing their head and heart. For them the problem is one of reclaiming and renegotiating their Indian experience: ‘identity is a Matrix of subject positions which may contradict one another. Indian subject identities are constituted in a multiplicity of discourses rising out of structure of religion, class, caste and gender. The narrator of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, reflecting upon his on confusing hybridity, and that of the world, exclaims at one point:

Oh, eternal opposition of inside and outside! Because a human beauty himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of every which thing are jumbled up inside him, and he is one person one minute and another person the next.” (236-37).

Salman Rushdie, whose work has been produced in the eighties and nineties, has removed himself from the sides of both nationality and naturalism, but remains in an engagement with economic colonialism and its consequences. In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie represents Indian attitudes and responses to England, British rule, the English and English language and education decades after the cession of British rule in India. These representations attest to be the lasting impact of the colonial encounter on Indian society. England, British rule and the English language are interwoven into the fabric of postcolonial Indian life and are necessarily reflected in Indian literature.

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