
SILENT OR SILENCED? ANALYZING THE THEME OF SILENCE IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract

Postcolonial writings aim at bringing out the suppressed voices of the marginalized. However, an analysis of Postcolonial literature by men writers brings to the forefront the harsh reality of these texts, in turn, suppressing the voices of women. One example is the Booker Prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. The novel is populated and dominated by the male characters who suppress their female counterparts. In all the relationships in the novel – Adam-Naseem, Nadir-Mumtaz, Ahmed-Amina, Saleem-Jamila, Saleem-Parvati, Shiva-Saleem, Saleem-Padma – the power leans towards the male characters. The women in the novel undergo suppression, resulting in the loss of identity and a sense of belonging. These confused females are repeatedly silenced into submission with their voices forever lost. This paper entitled "Left Outs: The Silenced Women in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" analyses silence as a recurring motif and a tool for the suppression of the women characters.

Keywords: *Postcolonial, marginalized, suppression, .etc*

Postcolonial writings aim at bringing out the suppressed voices of the marginalized. However, an in-depth analysis of Postcolonial literature brings to the forefront the harsh reality of the second level of suppression within the postcolonial novels – the suppressed, silent voices of women. This paper takes, for example, the Booker Prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. The novel is populated and dominated by the male characters whose female counterparts are often doomed to silence.

The theme of silence can be analyzed in all the relationships in the novel – Adam-Naseem, Nadir-Mumtaz, Ahmed-Amina, Saleem-Jamila, Saleem-Parvati, Shiva-Parvati, Saleem-Padma. The women are either silenced or unheard. This suppression results in the loss of both identity and a sense of belonging. Often, the confused females are silenced into submission. To quote Arundhati Roy from her 2004 Sydney Peace Prize Lecture, "...there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. However, are their voices lost forever? Silence can also have a second dimension when it is chosen by the marginalized as an act of rebellion. This paper entitled "Silent or Silenced? Analyzing the Theme of Silence in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" analyses the recurring theme of silence and how silence can be a double-edged sword.

The story is narrated by the protagonist, Saleem Sinai who insists that it is his story and his India that is recapitulated and recorded. He traces his family history which he claims is inseparably linked to Indian history. The narrator Saleem works in the pickle factory where his companion is the Padma. While Saleem, the male is the writer, the creator, Padma is merely the listener. She is his caretaker who takes care of all his needs. She is also the perfect audience who believes everything that Saleem says. The power is clearly centered around Saleem towards whom the love-struck Padma orbits like a satellite.

The first relationship encountered in Saleem's narration is the one between Aadam Sinai and Naseem. Naseem, the daughter of the landowner Ghani, is brought up as a very traditional Muslim girl. When she marries Adam Aziz, Germany returned doctor, he wants her to "Forget being a good Kashmiri girl. However, Naseem neither wants to change nor is she able to, even when Adam burns her purdah. To quote Tyson, "This feeling of being caught between cultures,..in a psychological limbo... cultural displacement is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as 'unhomeliness'" (420). Here, you do not feel at home even in your own home, because your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee Being out of place in the modern atmosphere of Delhi, Naseem closets herself in the kitchen where the kitchen and the pantry become her dominion into which she allows no other authority. Her identity crisis in the outside world can be seen in her repeated use of the phrase 'whatsitsname': "...whatsitsname as her leitmotif.... an unconscious cry for help.... she was adrift in the universe" (MC 49). In the crisis when Nadir Khan seeks refuge under Aadam Aziz, Naseem opposes the idea. Adam silences her saying "'Be silent, woman!.." (MC 66). Her wishes are overridden and it is Adam's voice that is heard and his decision that becomes action.

Mumtaz, the second daughter of Adam and Naseem falls in love with Nadir Khan and a secret wedding is arranged. However, their marital bliss is short-lived as Nadir's secret comes out. In peril of his life, Nadir does not give a thought to Mumtaz and flees the place writing "Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!"(MC 78). Here Nadir through his dominant male voice divorces his wife Mumtaz who is silenced and has no choice in the decision of divorce.

During Emerald's wedding, Mumtaz gets to know Ahmed Sinai and finds out that they share a liking for children. Soon they get married and in order to begin a new life, Ahmed simply changes Mumtaz's name to 'Amina': "'Change your name,' Ahmed Sinai said.... I'll choose a new name" (MC 81). Changing one's name is not so simple as the name is a crucial part of one's identity. Her male counterpart wishes to re-invent a whole new identity for his wife: "...who had renamed and so re-invented her, thus becoming in a sense her father as well as her new husband..." (MC 85).

Amina is not able to adjust to her new surroundings, leaving the hidden underground apartment that formed a part of her identity. Every morning when she gets up she feels that the sun is in the wrong place: "...as if her mind were refusing to accept the alteration in her circumstances..." (MC 84). Amina's life mirrors the life of the traditional women who are bound to their male guardians all their life.

Having married for the sake of children, Amina is not able to forget her past life and love her new husband. So, silently, she tries to love her husband in parts: "...she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts,... she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit" (MC 87). Ahmed Sinai liked the

power he had in the household. The act of Amina trying to get money from him is indeed pitiable: "Ahmed Sinai liked to be asked nicely for money, to have it wheedled out of him.... the techniques of street beggars..." (MC 90).

Soon the Sinai family begets two children – Saleem and his younger sister Jameela. Right from her birth, Jameela finds herself sidelined to her brother Saleem who is everyone's favorite – the boy born with a prophecy and blessings of two gurus. She suffers from an identity crisis at a very young age and she isn't even called by her name. She is nicknamed 'Brass Monkey' referring to the copper color of her hair and her mischievous activities. As Saleem himself points out, "I [Saleem] became the chosen child..." (MC 157), while he ignored younger sister, in order to seek attention, resorts to setting things on fire.

It is only through the acts of rebellion that Jameela's parents and neighbors notice her: "...if she was going to get any attention in her life, she would have to make plenty of noise" (MC 205). Worse still, her rebellion which was the result of her longing for attention and affection brings her punishment of the worst kind – 'Silence'. The girl's attempt at establishing her presence ends in failure and she is once again silenced: "Silence was, indeed, the worst punishment she could have been given;.." (MC 208).

These childhood incidents of longing for unrequited affection are so deeply engraved in Jameela's mind that throughout her life she distrusts love. As Saleem points out, "...desperate for affection, deprived of it by my overpowering shadow, she had a tendency to turn upon anyone who gave her what she wanted, as if she were defending against the possibility of being tricked" (MC 29). Finally, at the age of fourteen, she sings and as she expresses herself for the first time her name Jameela is used for the first time in the novel.

But, even then, Jameela is made to sing songs that are tailored to the needs of the nation. She is projected as a mere voice, a symbol of purity, long associated with women. She is not an individual but a mystery hidden beneath a veil, her real personality invisible, with only a small opening for her mouth to sing. However, the moment she speaks her mind, her real views on Pakistan, the hitherto praising rulers, lash out against her and she disappears into anonymity, "...exchanging one kind of invisibility for another;.." (MC 549), that is, silence.

Another important woman in the novel is Parvati, one among the midnight children. Parvati's gifts are that she is an actual witch with the powers of sorcery. She also has a basket of 'invisibility' into which one can vanish – an interesting gift, linking her to the other women who are also invisible to the world in the metaphorical sense. Parvati falls in love with Saleem who does not reciprocate her affection. She admits failure and her mouth develops a pronounced pout which becomes permanent, a prevailing sign of her inability. To quote Betty Frieden, "For women, as for men, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted" (1)

In an act of revenge, Parvati calls upon Shiva, her mythological counterpart, through her magical art. Shiva, who is already known for his innumerable affairs, now takes Parvati for his mistress. She devotes herself to serving him: "...she took off his boots, pressed his feet, brought him water flavored with freshly-squeezed limes,..oiled his mustache... and after all that produced a dinner of biriyani so exquisite..." (MC 574). However, like all the other women he deserted, Shiva also deserts Parvati when she becomes pregnant with his child. After all that, she

had done to him, and the abuse she had silently borne, Parvati is abandoned and thrown back to the slums.

Saleem had refused to marry her giving the reason that he could not give her a child. Seeing the pregnant Parvati, Saleem thinks that Parvati had done it on purpose as now he no longer could object to his marrying her. The people in the magician's ghetto convince Saleem to marry Parvati. Saleem had no other option but to yield but then he exerts his power by changing her name to 'Layla'. It is the woman again who suffers a loss of identity. The rebellious individuality that is seen in Parvati is non-existent in the new wife Layla who, after giving birth to her son, dies in the razing down of the slums.

Incidents of silencing and invisibility can be seen in the women characters whose voices are lost are subordinated to their male counterparts. However, a slight degree of rebellion can be traced. For example, Naseem attains a certain amount of power in the later days. Unable to establish her identity in the outside world, Naseem establishes her own protective space: "...she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (MC 47). She rules her twin kingdoms of kitchen and pantry and doesn't allow anyone to come in.

One particular incident of significance is when she undertakes the 'Oath of Silence'. When Aadam Aziz orders her, "Be a silent woman!" (MC 66), this act of silencing is taken by her as an oath where she changes the suppressive action of silencing by her husband into a weapon when she takes it up herself as a challenge. Here the power is subverted as she says, "You ask me, whatsitsname, for silence. So not one word..." (MC 66). Here she chooses to be silent and her silence actually has an oppressive feeling over the entire household. Throughout the years Naseem keeps on expanding in girth while Adam keeps on becoming thinner. The old men in the shops exclaim how Adam's wife had "...nearly made him do a disappearing trick" (MC 52). Adam's position keeps weakening and he becomes delusional. In the end, Naseem becomes the matriarch who rules the household.

Amina too acts independently when her husband Ahmed falls sick. She runs the household with rent and the property case with the money she wins in betting on horses. Later she even attempts to meet with her former husband Nadir Khan who comes in the disguise of an election contestant Qasim Khan. However, once Ahmed recovers, she resorts to her former position. She also stops seeing Qasim in fear of being exposed to seeing the terrible end of Lila Sabarmati's affair with Homi Cataract, which is orchestrated by her son, Saleem.

The younger women – Parvati alias Layla and Jameela, the Brass Monkey – are not as powerful and remain silent spectators of their own fates being written by the men around them. Hence it can be observed that the women in *Midnight's Children* are for the most part silenced either by the male counterpart or the male-dominated society. However, this same recurring theme of silence imposed on the women can be turned into a weapon of power. This subversion can be noted in the change in power roles that happens between Adam and Naseem. Hence in the novel *Midnight's Children*, for the major part, the women are silenced into suppression, except for the matriarch Naseem who uses silence itself as a double-edged sword to dismantle the power of patriarchy.

Abbreviation

MC – Midnight's Children

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