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## THE DECENTERING OF THE UNIVERSALISTIC CLAIMS: A POST-COLONIAL STUDY OF THE *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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### **Abstract:**

The era following the Second World War witnessed the dismantling of the Empire especially in the Indian sub-continent though this was effectively realized only on the political front. The European ways of life and thoughts persisted in the colonies even when the colonists were impelled to acknowledge and to be apologetic about the inhuman treatment that the native populous was subjected to during the colonial era. The dislocation of the native culture by the imperial power was so devastating that most of these regions remain, overtly or covertly, victims of their past even today. This paper, with reference to *Midnight's Children* (MC) by Salman Rushdie, attempts to delineate how the natives defied the universalistic claims of their once colonial masters by reinventing their past customs, culture, religions, and conventions. Rushdie in his novel endeavors to reveal that the colonial ghost still haunts the Indian subcontinent even after many decades of independence and how present generation is chasing it out.

**Keywords:** colonial, post-colonial, universalistic claims, native, Eurocentric, culture, identity, dislocation.

As the colonial domination began to wane, the exploited colonies commenced to map out a new identity for their own political futures and slowly started to seek and reclaim their own voices. So, one method of doing it was to undermine the universalistic claims-the colonizer's 'godly' burden of civilizing the rest of the world and the touchstone being whatever belongs to them- of the colonizer. When the universalistic claims are established, we tend to "demote and disregard cultural, social, regional, and national differences in experience and outlook" (Barry 191), there will be a tendency to prefer to judge everything by a single and supposedly, 'universal standard' that is the colonizer's standard. Thus, "the white Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all others correspondingly relegated to subsidiary marginal roles" (Barry 192).

Franz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) calls the "voice" of the colonised as "cultural resistance". For centuries, the European colonizing powers have

devalued the colonies' past seeing its pre-colonial period as a pre-civilized epoch or even a historical void. Children, both black and white, are taught to see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the European. This European 'magnanimity' or 'western generosity' in civilizing the orient is being thrown overboard by post-colonialism. Fanon argues that the first step for the colonised in this regard is to reclaim their past. Thus, rejecting the civilizing mission of the colonizer, the colonised revisit their own past, traditional values, customs, beliefs and conventions to establish their identity.

Salman Rushdie, in his booker prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1991), tries to retake the past of the colonised in an attempt to delineate a post-colonial identity. Saleem Sinai, the narrator protagonist of *Midnight's Children* is Rushdie's representation of independent India. Three generations of the Sinai family parallel about seventy years of recent Indian history, from the Jallianwala Bagh massacre to the Emergency. In the process, the narrative imbibes many of the post-colonial features of the nation in the aftermath of imperial rule. It is also the novelist's search for identity and the quest for home.

Saleem's grandfather, Dr. Aadam Aziz, is a portrait of the alienated native who has returned from abroad. Having spent five years in Germany, Dr. Aziz comes home to the Kashmir valley to find that he has become a stranger in his own land. The brief flirtation with European culture had completely altered his vision. He now looked at Kashmir with travelled eyes and found the land hostile, the air suffocating and discovered a hole in himself, a vacuum which refused to be filled. In his prayers intervened memories of his German friends Oskar and Lubin. [Guided by old memories he tried to unite himself with his earlier self]. But, it was no good, he was caught in a strange middle ground trapped between belief and disbelief, and this was a charade after all [...] not of those who have incurred your wrath, Nor of those who have gone astray. My grandfather bent his forehead towards the earth. Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer-mat-covered, curved up towards him. And now it was the tussock's time. At one and the same time a rebuke from Ilse-Oskar-Ingrid-Heidelberg as well as valley-and-God, it smote him upon the point of the nose. Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds. And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole (MC 5-6).

Dr. Aziz gave up in resignation in the knowledge that he was "knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve" (MC 6). The result was a permanent alteration- a hole- and the 'middle-place', the position which the colonised elite often find them in.

Tai, the boatman, displays the initial hatred of the colonised to the ways of the colonizer. He views Aziz's medical bag with a mixture of hostility and distrust. To him, the bag meant "abroad" and all that went with it- "the alien thing, the invader, progress"

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(MC 16) – which has taken possession of the young doctor's mind and divided them. He has only contempt for Aziz using the stethoscope, a machine, instead of trusting his senses like his ancestors did. Tai's feelings grow so intense that he tries to drive him away from the valley by refusing to wash himself and attributing it to the presence of Dr. Aziz's reaction- "the resentful anger of a cast-child" (MC 17) - again underscoring the loss of a sense of belonging. Tai nearly succeeded in branding him as in alien and, therefore untrustworthy. Aziz was hurt to know that he was suspected and even ostracized by the poor. Uma Parameswaran notes that with his ageless, timeless aura, Tai becomes a repository of racial memory (Parameswaran 38). His words:

I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen emperors die. Listen. Listen, nakkoo ... - the brandy bottle again, followed by brandy-voice, and words more intoxicating than booze - ... I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head. Once it was set down in old lost books. Once I knew where there was a grave with pierced feet carved on the tombstone, which bled once a year. Even my memory is going now; but I now, although I can't read (MC11)

substantiate this view. His contempt of the interpretation of history in textbooks shows the impact of the colonizer's culture on the native one. His attitude to the Indo-Pak dispute – that Kashmir was for Kashmiris – echoes the pre-independent mentality of individual princely states which saw themselves as self-sufficient entities.

Rushdie makes use of the fringe characters in the novel to highlight various facets of the colonial experience. The skin disease of the Rani of Cooch, Naheem, is shown as the inevitable consequence of assimilating the ways of a culture that is not and cannot exactly be one's own. She admits that she is the helpless victim of her cross-cultured concerns: "my skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit" (MC 46). Ahmed Sinai voices the same idea when he says that puffed up with black money, the businessman symbolizes the 'anglophilism' in the slavish mentality of many Indians. His obsession with a noble lineage is the colonial urge to show off to the foreigners, an attempt to overcome the feeling of inferiority. Ahmed Sinai traces his ancestry back to the Mughals and even invents the idea of the family curse. Saleem's uncle Mustapha Aziz and his wife, on the other hand, allow us a glimpse into the narrow world of the bureaucrats and their rank conscious wives. Saleem's statement that Indians have, as a race, been vulnerable to the Europeans seems justified in this context.

Mr. Methwold, the Englishman – "Dr. Myth World" as Rushdie would have us to understand – is the representative of the empire on which the sun never set. His delineation of the merits of colonialism –education, railways, the parliamentary system, preservation of the ancient monuments, and works of art like the Taj – agrees with the average

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colonizer's concept of colonialism as a kind of civilization mission. Mr. Methwold's insistence that everything in the apartment should be retained as such after his departure, initially meets with the disapproval of the new tenants. But, the latter soon adjust themselves to the Methwold estate with its ceiling fans, goldfish, and cocktail evenings. It is only a prelude to the indiscriminate and rather senseless aping of the west that is to haunt successive generations. That the colonizer does not escape unscathed either, is made clear by Mr. Methwold's confession that "beneath this still English exterior lurks a mind with a very Indian lust for allegory" (MC 110); hence, his whim to hand over the land at the same time as the transfer of power from the Raj.

Rushdie had to make his narrator omniscient and miraculously gifted in order to encompass the whole of India. He traces the idea back to a joke in his family about how the British ran away two months after he was born. This gave him the notion of connecting a child with a historical event. Saleem compares himself to Haroun-al-Rashid, the legendary Caliph of Baghdad, who moved incognito among his people. But, he does not really understand how the life of an individual can impinge on the fate of a nation. All he knows is that "[...] historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled, my family's existence in the world" (MC 25). The parallelism is indicated either by simultaneous occurrences or direct involvement on the part of Saleem, leaving him with a confused sense of guilt and responsibility. Accordingly Dr. Aziz's love affair with Naseem runs parallel to the course of World War I. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre becomes just another instance that requires Dr. Aziz's medical attention. World War II is related to the optimism-epidemic in India through the agency of Mian Abdullah. The dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki coincides with an equally shattering bombshell in the Aziz family, that Mumtaz had remained a virgin even after two years of married life. Finally, Saleem's birth occurs as the midnight hour announces the birth of the nation. It is not strange that he feels "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (MC 3), his destiny somehow chained to that of his nation. Baby Saleem soon makes his presence felt in all the changes around him. He begins to hold himself responsible for the financial breakdown of his father's assets, the language riots that resulted in the formation of Maharashtra and Gujarat, the coup of Ayub Khan and so on.

The course of the family, meanwhile, continues to run parallel to national and international events. Nasser sinking ships in the Gulf is compared to the Brass Monkey setting shoes on fire, on the grounds that both impede progress, literally and metaphorically. Nehru's illness is seen as related to, and a follow up of, Dr. Aziz's death in the Kashmir valleys. The elections of 1975 are of interest because Saleem's mother canvasses for the communists. His aunt Emerald involves him in Pakistani politics and he becomes a member of the Cutia gang which arrests President Mujibur Rahman of Bangladesh. The dropping of bombs on Pakistani cities during the Indo-Pak war is

portrayed as solely aimed at destroying his family. The timely ceasefire, then, prevents their total annihilation.

But after the Sunderbans, it appears as though the tables are turned. Instead of Saleem directing the course of events, extraneous factors seem to take control of his life. Shiva bursts into his life with India's first nuclear explosion. The birth of his son parallels the clamping of the Emergency. The mute baby Aadam Sinai is symbolic of a nation silenced under the reign of darkness. The widow with her parted hair interferes in Saleem's life and deprives him of his powers. In fact, the very aims of the Emergency is seen to be the rooting out of the "midnight's children". Sanjay Gandhi's sterilization campaign renders them impotent and completes the process. It signifies the impotence of the generation that has wasted all its potential and failed to realize the dreams of post-independent India. By now, Saleem realizes that history operates on a grander scale than any individual. His life had indeed been a mirror of his times, entwined with it on the literal, metaphorical, active, and passive levels. In the end, it trampled him underfoot, leaving to a tougher and better equipped generation to grapple with the future. As his quest for meaning draws to a conclusion, Saleem Sinai gains an insight into his identity:

I am the sum-total of everything that went before me, of all that I have been, seen, done, of everything done to me. I am everyone, everything, everywhere, whatever in the world affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come [...] (MC 457).

The continuity of history and of perennial India is asserted here. The narrator merges with the history he has recorded.

As the *New York Times* aptly put it, *Midnight's Children* is a continent finding its voice. Rushdie affirms Anuradha D. Needham's view that the definition of a post-colonial identity assumes significance in the vast gap that exists between popular representations of the formerly colonised world in the west, and the expatriate writer's actual experience of his native country and its people (Needham 610). In "Outside the Whale", Rushdie states "the various films and TV shows and books [about the Raj] [...] propagate a number of notions about history which must be quarreled with, as loudly and as embarrassingly as possible (Imagining Homelands 101).

Thus, Rushdie, in his novel *Midnight's Children*, makes a visit into India's past and finds an identity of its own. By decentering the universalistic claims of the colonizer, Rushdie delineates the existence of 'multiple centers' that are equally significant, valid and authentic. In this process of decolonizing the colonialist power in all its forms, he succeeds in revealing and dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional, social and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power which remained even after India's

political independence in 1947. The hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant, colonizing culture are held to be true and valid for humanity is effectively resisted by Rushdie's characters in the novel.

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