

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: A STUDY OF POST-COLONIAL MYTH

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Abstract

This paper attempts to trace the use of myth as a post-colonial tenet in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is one of the significant texts of the post-colonial era. He represents the post-colonial subjects of nation, identity, and existence through his narrative means of alternative history and myth. He reconstructs myth in order to voice his vision of alternative reality and hybridity. *Midnight's Children*, set in India, encompasses the history of a nation along with the history of an individual, Saleem. Rushdie attempts to unravel the intricate relation between myth, nation, and gender. The protagonist of *Midnight's Children* Saleem is linked with the birth of a nation and forms the alter ego of the symbolic nation. Rushdie offers alternative myths to substantiate his post-colonial identity. This approach involves an identity struggle of a post-colonial individual. Subsequent to the struggle, there are many second-order ideological moorings that trace the myth and nation; colonizer and the colonized.

Keywords: post-colonial, history, myth, hybridity

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is one of the significant texts of the post-colonial era. He represents the post-colonial subjects of a nation, identity, and existence through his narrative means of alternative history and myth. He reconstructs myth in order to voice his vision of alternative reality and hybridity. *Midnight's Children*, set in India, encompasses the history of a nation along with the history of an individual, Saleem.

Rushdie attempts to unravel the intricate relation between myth, nation, and gender. The protagonist of *Midnight's Children* Saleem is linked with the birth of a nation and forms as the alter ego of the symbolic nation. Rushdie offers alternative myths to substantiate his post-colonial identity. This approach involves an identity struggle of a post-colonial individual. Subsequent to the struggle, there are many second-order ideological moorings that trace the myth and nation; colonizer and the colonized.

Saleem Sinai who is born at the midnight of freedom, a half-Indian, half-British hybrid represents varied facets of India. It is not the hybridity of character but the hybridity of culture and nation at large. In a way, Rushdie traces the history of post-independent nation building and issues related to the post-colonial writer. Rushdie as a post-colonial writer dons the role of a harbinger in delineating the extent of religion in a self-proclaimed secular nation. The cultural expression Rushdie adopts is not a rigid commitment to established myths, but a strategy of liberation. The use of myth equips the author with the necessary space to reconstruct the post-colonial myth to discuss the issues of nationalism and hybridity.

The post-colonial fiction is centered on the conflict between the native and colonial cultures. The post-colonial author is at war with ideology he received in the form of cultural inheritance. The colonial value system imbibed through colonial education is in conflict with the native values. Writers react in different ways to this situation of loss of identity and profanation of values. Writers like Naipaul have trodden a new path of reconciling with the colonial culture and have acquired the identity of the colonizer. The other extreme view is the case of Ngugi Wa Thiong's, who has refused to accept the colonizer's language and has embraced the pre-colonial culture and tradition.

Unlike the other fictionists, Rushdie has undertaken to reconstruct the past using his personal version of history. In the words of Rushdie about the position of the artist: As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. (Shame, 92)

Rushdie exercises his fantastic vision to recreate the mythic world employing the characters of Ganesh, Shiva and Shakti as the alter identities of creative, destructive and energy forces as perceived in the Hindu mythology. These archetypal male and female characters are chosen to enact the author's purpose of forging magical realist world. The mythic family of

characters with creative father, powerful mother and freakish son represent the history of India itself which is disfigured.

Rushdie draws the Hindu mythical characters like Ganesha to represent an exaggerated sense of perception through a long nose and wide ears. It is no denial of fact Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* is modeled after Ganesha, who is born with extrasensory powers are burdened with history are forced to reveal their epic adventures. Saleem in *Midnight's Children* wonders:

Who, like Sin the moon, controls the waters, bringing the gift of rain...whose mother was Ira, queen consort of Kashyap, the Old Tortoise Man, lord and progenitor of all creatures on the earth... the Elephant who is also the rainbow, and lighting, and whose symbolic value, it must be added, is highly problematic and unclear.

Well, then: elusive as rainbows, unpredictable as lighting, garrulous as Ganesh, it seems I have my own place in the ancient wisdom, after all. (234)

Saleem is a close resemblance to Ganesha. He is portrayed as more than a mortal whose avowed intention is to impart wisdom. The creation of Saleem is to not to watch the events of history as a passive observer but as a product of history and as a thorough product of post-colonial subject. Thus Rushdie creates Saleem as a struggling identity of post-colonial self. The ultimate disintegration of Saleem into thousand fissures is trampled by the feet of millions who rush on without heeding his voice. This deprives him of the opportunity to proclaim the prophetic mission. Like Ganesh who is decapitated by his own father and is forged into one with multiple identities.

Rushdie's portrayal of women is not the other, but with a potential force to annihilate the protagonists' lives. They are mythical figures like Kali, goddess Shakti and are endowed with superhuman powers. Rushdie utters the force of women in *Midnight's Children*:

Women have made me, and also unmade. And, as you know, there's no escape from her. (483)

Rushdie's representation of women is not meek, subjugated and the other. They are like Kali, an avenging goddess. In Rushdie's women come to symbolize many roles as sister, mother, a national leader in a post-colonial nation.

Rushdie's conscious creation of Saleem and his interaction with Padma (a mythical reflection of the goddess of lotus) has a decisive role to play in the narrative.

How to dispense with the Padma? (177)

The Padma is created as a counterweight to Saleem. In Hindu, myth lotus is the symbol of consciousness. On the other hand, Saleem describes her as Goddess Laxmi:

The Padma, who along with the yaksa genii, who represents the sacred treasure of the earth, and the sacred rivers, Ganga Yamuna Sarasvathi, and the tree goddesses, is one of the Guardians of Life, beguiling and comforting mortal men while they pass through the dream-web of Maya... (233)

Rushdie creates the character of Padma as an ignorant, hairy, well-muscled peasant woman, whose only ambition is to marry the impotent Saleem. The character of Saleem and Padma have two different purposes. The Padma is seen only a person of temporal vision, whereas Saleem is cracking under the weight of history.

The portrayal of Widow is the most terrible incarnation of Shakti in *Midnight's Children*. She is seen as deprived and is prepared to destroy the manhood of hundreds of men. Saleem wonders if Indira is jealous of his identification with India. "... in the Madam's mind, into that in-those-days-famous phrase: India is Indira and Indira is India?" (501) The images used to describe her are terrifying and nightmarish. "green and black the Widow's hair and clutching hand and children little balls and one-by-one and torn-in-half and little balls go flying green and black her hand is green and her nails are black as black." (503) Rushdie localizes the myth and offers a reconstructed myth. He effectively employs archetypes to render his vision of reality. His use of myth is to express the helpless entanglement in the web of the post-colonial condition. This situation is further marked by imperialism, fanaticism and the burden of history.

Salman Rushdie projects the experience of post-colonial self through the characters of Saleem, Shiva, Padma, and Parvati. All the characters are designed in a pattern to enact the post-colonial mythification. The choice of myth is noteworthy in that it stresses the multiplicity of faith and cosmopolitan nature of Indian post-colonial situation. Not only does Rushdie use mythic characters, but he also formulates a condition congenial to present a movement transcending nationalism and colonialism.

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