

## THE PAST IS THE PRESENT IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

*It is a saying that the past is past and it is dead but the flashbacks of the past always haunt us in the present. On the other hand past never dies but it remains as The Inheritance of Loss,(2006) says Kiran Desai. Separating past from the present is a Sisyphean task. For instance, fulfillment has always been associated with the loss. Similarly the unending saga of hostility of partition of Indian subcontinent started from the midnight of 15th August 1947 and has got transmitted into the blood of the children from both the nations, as Saleem points out in Midnight's Children (1981),*

*'... the rivalry that began that night would never be ended, until two knives slashed, ... had leaked into me, imbibing me with the notion of loose federalism and making me venerable to knives...'. (p. 306)*

A Tale of Two Cities (1869) by Charles Dickens, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children(1981) and such other tales of divide are the tales that have taught us to 'segregate and affiliate' in the name of race, class, caste, gender and religion. The present paper aims at reviewing Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children in the context of 'lingering' of the past on the present through some of the key terms of postcolonial discourse.

The postcolonial cultural theory has been characterized by features like orientalism, hybridity, mimicry, subalterns, migrations and diaspora, nativism, transnationalism, translocalism, ethnocentrism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, expatriation, alienation, isolation, and globalization. The west came in contact with the east due to colonization. It led then to intercultural encounters due to temporary or permanent migration from the native land to a foreign target country. Immigration of the masses leads to economic, social and cultural prosperity but at the same time damages the psycho-social fabric of the respective society. It has changed rigid notions of linguistic, political, religious, social, economic, and cultural identities. The individual identity gets split and as Salman Rushdie puts it 'gets fragmented' into the original identify or 'national identity' and destined identity or 'immigrant identity'. It gives birth to a clash between cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, and indigenous identity and the hybrid. The indigenous identities have started shrinking and they are giving



birth to new global identities. The post-modern human being has to adopt himself to pluralism due to global multi-cultural assimilation and acculturation. In order to maintain glocal (global and local) identity, deeper understanding, coordination and cooperation among different indigenous groups is needed.

Midnight's Children, by Salman Rushdie, the Booker of Bookers, the big read book according to BBC survey, great book of twentieth century, a winner of James Tate Black Memorial Award, is a prominent voice in literary and culture studies. It is a masterpiece of fine blend of fiction and history that is associated with pre-colonial and post-colonial India. It deals with the story of a boy 'Saleem Sinai' who was born at the exact hour of midnight at the declaration of Indian independence with fractured mindset but with a magical ability to know through telepathy and smell. Partition of India has damaged the social fabric and left scars on the minds of the citizens of post-colonial era. The novel is a fictional autobiography in which Saleem Sinai is portrayed as the author himself. Saleem's life is associated with the postcolonial historical upheavals in Indian subcontinent. The colonial clash between the superior Occidentals and the inferior Orientals can be explained through some of the examples from the selected text.

Edward Said in his most celebrated book Orientalism (1977) on colonialism used the word Orientals. It does mean an exploitation of the Oriental colonized from the east at the hands of the Occidental colonizers from the west through colonization. Said attacks basic racial distinction and discrimination as the construct of the west. The west proposed them as the superior race and the east is portrayed as inferior. For instance, Adam Aziz, a foreign returned doctor, who received his medical education in Heidelberg, Germany, is not completely trusted by the Orientals of Kashmir. His wife complains about his western way of living. On the other hand, Adam does not find any sense in religious practices of the Indians. He tries to fit into the given set of practices. The conflict between the civilized and the savage, intelligent and primitive, and superior and inferior has been nicely presented through Adam's encounters with the Indians, the Bombay estate owner Methwold's clash with his tenants or possessors of the estate, Adam's German friend Ilse's negative impressions of the native Indians and her acceptance of Indians' spiritual strength in the end help us to conclude that the author sympathizes with the Orientals in pre-colonial India. Methwold's conditions for purchasing house in Methwold estate itself speak volumes of superiority of the West because he does not allow the Orientals to change the interior of the houses. Indians accept it due to reasonable cost and the comforts that have been offered by western furnishings. The British Raj has formally ended but informal cultural imposition seems increasing in post-colonial era. Although the owners show their unacceptance initially but very soon get used to the western appliances. Neocolonial imperialism thus started with the acceptance of English culture. The author sarcastically comments to such acceptance of the Indians as 'All is well'. The second important term subaltern has been discussed further.

Subaltern discourse deals with the marginalized, oppressed, subjugated class of the colonized named as subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985) asks the subaltern to know and to follow western ways of knowing, of reasoning and of language. This school of thought wants to give dignity to the marginalized sections of the society. It is a struggle against their social exclusion. Natives of the third and fourth world nations like women, tribal folk, Dalits of India and such other groups are subaltern who want to change the western notions of dominance. It gives voice to silent and marginalized subjects, *Midnight's Children* gives several instances of subjugation of the marginalized. The colour of the skin has always remained an issue of superiority. Ahmed Sinai, fair in colour, marries a dark woman Amina. Ahmed's cousin, Zohra, who does not like her brother's choice and reveals her own very Eurocentric racial attitude toward dark skin,

'How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course they know; even blackies know white is nicer, don't you think so?' (p. 70)

On the other hand, Amina blames her husband's Christian and Anglo-Indian secretaries (would be mistresses) for their superior language and colour,

'Those Anglos,' she said to Mary, revealing a touch of snobbery, 'with their funny names, Fernanda and Alonso and all, and surnames, my God! Sulaca and Colaco and I don't know what. What should I care for them? Cheap type females.' (p. 133)

Methwold, British estate owner, on the one hand, represents superior race and tries to maintain his legacy by keeping his race's inheritance intact. His tenants, on the other hand, fight with each other for false egos of superiority of race and language. The clash of notions of superiority associated with religion that has been portrayed through employees like Musa and Pereira. Musa, being a Muslim, feels that he gets dominated by the Christian Pereira. This clash between the traditional way of living and the modern gives rise to an argument for whether to go for hegemonic culture and to accommodate into a new culture. Nationalism has been one of the major themes of the selected novel that is illustrated further with a few examples from the text.

The title *Midnight's Children* represents an important event of the history of Indian subcontinent. The struggle for independence is a movement undertaken by the colonized to gain political and economic independence. Colonization helped the natives to unite and to fight against the imperialists. Political independence was the main attainment of the movement. The nationalist leaders of the free nations later on took the challenge of eradicating colonized psyche. The selected text refers to very famous historical movements in pre-independent and post-independent era. The pre-independent era is represented through



Adam Aziz, his family and friends, fisherman Tai, references of Gandhiji's Satyagrah and other movements, Janianwala Baug Hatyakand, and some others. Fisherman Tai raises his voice in favour of Kashmiris. He supports Kashmiri's movement for separate Kashmir. Post-independence era starts with Nehru's radio speech on the dawn of freedom, Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, Hindu-Muslim riots after partition, the re-organization of the states in India, the language agitation, the Chinese aggregation, the theft of the sacred relic from Hazrathbal mosque, Khaliastan movement, Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, India-Pakistan war, Bangladesh war, Emergency period in the regime of Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi's cleansing of Jama Masjid slums and his mission for family planning. The post-independence generation that was born at the midnight stroke with a burden of the cracks of partition to their inner and outer psyche has very beautifully woven in the narrative. The midnight's children, according to the author, carry the burden of the pre-independence issues of subjugation and post-independence challenges of development. Hybridity is one of the postcolonial issues that has been revealed in further analysis.

Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994) refers term hybridity. The term denotes symbiotic mixture of races, ethnicities and cultures. Colonization was resulted into inter-racial, inter-religious, international and other contacts of the west with the east. It gives rise to the conflict of the mother culture and the alien culture. Hybridity can be looked upon as an escape to binary thinking and which has destabilized colonial power structures. It is associated with creolization, multiculturalism, ethnicity and globalization. It underlines the fact that hegemonic structures can be dismantled through interaction among all strata of the society. Rushdie believes that indigenous identities cannot be retained in the inter-racial, inter-religious and inter-national encounters of the east with the west. In fact he refuses to label himself as the product of the east or the west. He refuses to belong to a particular identity but prefers hybrid heterogeneous identity. In his non-fiction *Imaginary Homelands* he explains that his narrator Saleem is a product of memory, history and circumstances. India stands for plurality and hybridity, under these circumstances the protagonist Saleem has shown as grows up. Hybridity can be very well linked with Rushdie's idea of chatanification. At the end of the novel the narrator Saleem sums up his statement by cheering diversity of India,

“Symbolic value of the pickling process... Every pickle jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!” (p. 642)

The author refers to Chutney again and again which is a mixture of several food items and adds taste to a meal. Likewise India's diversity leads to hybrid combination of several classes, castes, religions and ethnicities. It adds entirely different flavor to her culture. The author describes Bombay culture with local and foreign traditions and he favours hybrid

identity of Bombay people. Mimicry is another important aspect that cannot be separated from any of the post-modern text.

V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* (1964) pinpoints a pinch of the colonized who is blamed as an imitator of the west. The colonizer, being presented as a superior entity, the colonized started mimicking his ruler in culture, language, fashion and style initially. He realized the loss of his own self and his culture and led to a huge disappointment. It gave birth to intellectual contradiction between the self and the other, cultural clash between native and alien, stigma of hybridity and creolization. Homi Bhabha in his *Of Mimicry and Men* (1994) depicts mimicry as one of the elusive and effective strategies of the colonizer who played a role of a serpent by imposing his culture systematically like poison and spoiled indigenous cultures in the colonies. The colonized is caught in a dilemma of double articulation of the 'self' and the 'other'. Lord Macaulay's *Minutes on Education* (1835) can highlight colonizers' agenda of making a workers' class as imitators. Most of the postcolonial texts exclusively discuss the tension of mimicry through their characters. Most of the important characters in the selected text refuse mimicry of the west. For instance, Adam Aziz, though returned from Germany, returns back to his roots and remains faithful to his cultural roots. Ahmad Sinai, his son-in-law, gets disturbed by pigmentation of his white skin. He explains that he always hated the white people's skin with the signs of pigmentation. He remarks, 'All the best people are white under the skin; I have merely given up pretending'. The tenants in the Methwold estate accepts western style of living and unknowingly start imitating the British. The clash between the center and the periphery is unending because today's center may become tomorrow's periphery. As W. B. Yeats says in *The Second Coming* 'Things fall apart, the center cannot hold...'. Hence mimicry is the automatic adoption of physical behavior and imitation of good habits should be encouraged. Development is associated with decolonization that is put forth by the author through some examples.

Development is the aftermath of colonialism. The author refers to the second five year plan of 1956. He notices positive changes in the development of post-independence India during the first five year plan,

"...during these five years, the number of landless and unemployed masses actually increased, so that it was greater than it had ever been under the British Raj, there were also substantial gains. The production of iron ore was almost doubled; power capacity did double; coal production leaped from thirty-eight million to fifty-four million tons. Five billion yards of bicycles, machine tools, diesel engines, power pumps and ceiling fans. But I can't help ending on a downbeat: illiteracy survived unscathed; the population continued to mushroom."

The last but not the least important aspect is 'Globalism'.



Post-colonial era is carrying a burden of neocolonial economic superimposition. The colonies gained independence after the Second World War but colonial powers continue their dominance through economic enslavement of the marginalized third world nations. The term neocolonialism appeared in 1963 against capitalistic notions of the developed first world. The division of the world into the First World Nations and the Third World Nations is one of the developments of economic power structures. Neocolonialism increases the gap between the developed and underdeveloped nations. 'Globalism' is an answer to all the post war threats but it cannot come into reality because of the division of the world into economically sound and weak nations. Globalism can be called as neoliberalism. It deals with the philosophy of 'the world as a single unit or a nest'. It is a positive step taken by the theorists for the welfare of all after postcolonial encounters. It is expected to forget the racial, class, ethnic, religious and gender differences and to get united in the name of humanity. The global human being is expected to be without having binary oppositions. Almost all the characters in the selected text are portrayed as having a quality of a Phoenix that reemerges from the ashes by learning through experiences. The characters in the selected text give several instances of mutual understanding and cooperation on national and international fronts. Adam Aziz's try to connect with his roots, Saleem's journey from Delhi to Mumbai and then to Pakistan and such other encounters of some minor characters indirectly give a message of assimilation and acculturation as one of the aspects of Globalism.

Salman Rushdie tries to give voice to the voiceless. He has made a successful attempt to bring the margins to the center and to raise their voices on international fronts. He has given dignity to the migrants who are living as foreigners by setting his own example of not to compromise with one's thoughts and principles. The past or the history has always played a role of a teacher who tries to warn us at crucial time. Let us learn from the past experiences and make the present a happy living. To conclude, let me refer to one of the quotes from The Partition Omnibus that asks us to take lesson from the past:

"This was a heavy price and the memory of this painful and costly transaction will linger for years and continue to embitter and enrage the refugees. Perhaps there are some who will take warning from this sad chapter in our history and endeavor to guard against a repetition of these events. So long as sectarianism and narrow provincialism are allowed to poison the minds of the people, so long as there are ambitious men with corruption inside them, seeking power and position, so long will the people continue to be deluded and misled, as the Muslim masses were deluded and misled by the League leaders and so long will discord and disruption continue to threaten our peace and integrity."



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